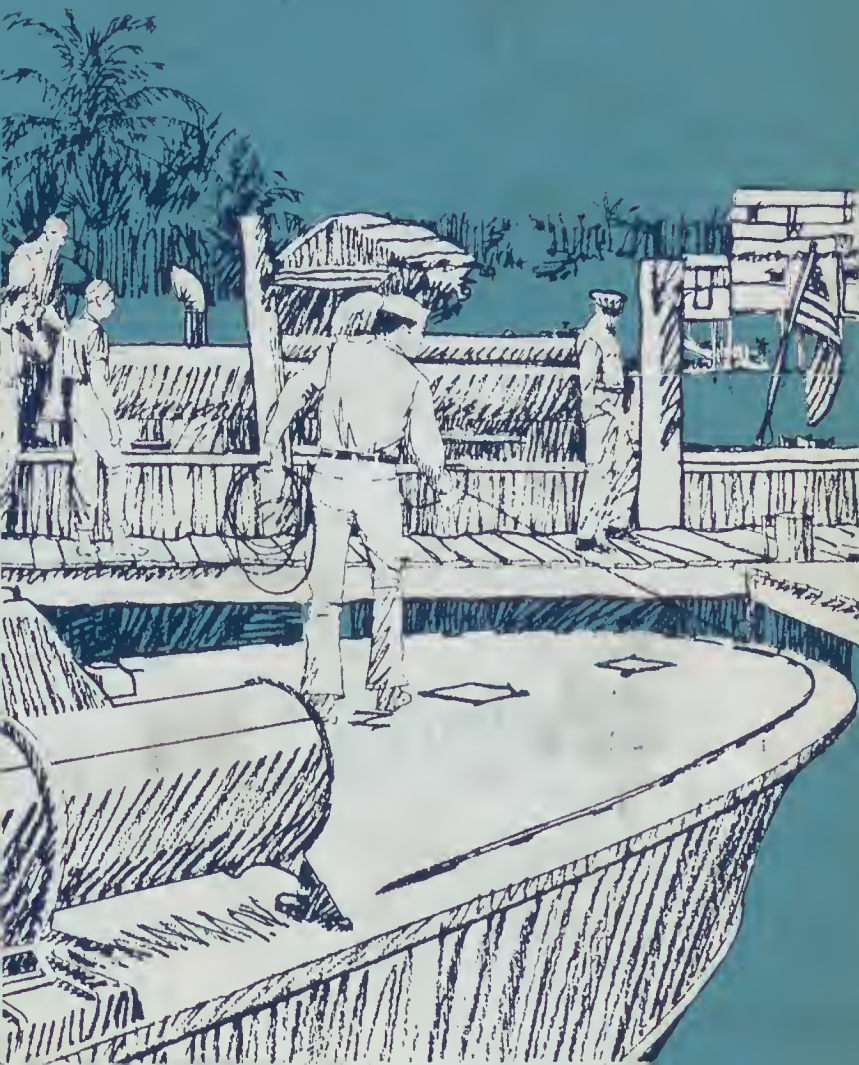


TORPEDO RUN

ON IRON
BOTTOMED BAY

by JOHN CLAGETT





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illustrated by Dennis Fritz

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CHAPTER ONE

The Boat

Larry Cushing decided that a mile could be a long way. The July day had become very warm, and the bulk of his folded and lashed hammock and seabag bore heavily on his shoulders.

"You'd think the darned Navy would give us heroes a truck," Collins moaned. "Boy, this stuff weighs a ton."

"Yeah, come on, Carter, let's rest awhile," said another of the seamen trudging toward the docks of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. "I'm pooped."

"Pipe down," Carter replied. "The man said to march straight to Pier H, and that's what we're gonna do. Look at 'Skeeter' Cushing there. He's smaller than you are and his seabag is just as heavy, but he ain't gripin'."

Larry kicked savagely at a large einder, sending it skipping along the road. Why couldn't people forget his size? He weighed only 135. So what? He made it count. A gap in the buildings showed him the towers of Manhattan across the East River, and his excitement returned.

"Give some guys a little authority and it eurdles their

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brains," said another seaman. "I ain't in no hurry to get to work, Carter. Hold it up."

Larry *was* in a hurry. He'd been waiting a long time to see a PT boat, and he was going to be a crew member on one of them. He remembered the pictures he had seen in the newsreels—streamlined, modern-looking boats, with twin plastic turrets and snapping radio antennas hurtling over smooth harbor water at a speed that left white water behind them like flags. Forty knots? Fifty knots? Some said more. Man, that was barreling!

"Say, what's that? Sounds like an airfield."

Somewhere ahead a motor had roared into life, followed by another and then by dozens. The roars blended together and became a wild pulsation that seemed to shake the ground.

"I don't know," Carter said. "But I—"

They rounded the corner of a building and could see water ahead. The wave of sound poured over them, stopping their voices as they stared.

In the slip ahead, tied up alongside a squat concrete barge, lay several rows of long, gray boats. Whip antennas and short tripod masts perched on them, the antennas vibrating and shuddering. Machine gun barrels made a stubby forest. Men moved on the decks and clambered over the curved superstructures. Small colored flags snapped at the masts.

Larry forgot the others with him. PT boats! He was going to be a PT man! A figure standing on the superstructure of one of the boats waved both hands, and the boat drifted away from its nest. Others were moving. They picked up speed, gliding with a roar out of the long slip, falling into a gray column and leaving the acrid smell of exhaust

behind. The other nests were dissolving. Each bow was only feet behind the square stern of the preceding PT. The squadron moved from the slip in a long single file. Within a minute the last boat had rounded the outer corner of the dock. They all disappeared from sight and slowly the combined tumult of their engines died away, returning once or twice on a flaw of wind. Larry felt a sense of loss. Not one PT was left in the slip.

"Well," said Carter, shrugging. "There'll be somebody left to give us hell. There always is in the Navy."

The man on the concrete barge wore stiffly pressed khakis, gold leaves in his collar, and a white scarf. His face was dark and he was glaring at the six seamen standing before his desk.

"Dupszyk!" he roared. "Are these our replacements?"

"Yes, sir," said the nervous-looking lieutenant who had brought them in.

"I ask for destroyer sailors and they give me this bunch of boots. You! You men! Have any of you ever been to sea?"

Silence. Then Larry gathered the nerve to raise his hand.

"Well? Speak up, man! You're in the Navy, not a school-room. Have you been to sea?"

"Yes, sir."

"What in? Rowboat? Yacht?"

"A Chesapeake Bay bugeye, sir."

"A bugeye? Well, well. Working or playing?"

"Working, sir. Every summer for four years, with some oystering in season. Sometimes we carried lumber from Norfolk to Baltimore."

"Glad to hear it, son. All right, you men. It's not your fault that you're green and new, but you're in a tough service

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now. It's not formal—you can forget a lot of the stuff you learned in boot camp. But there is one thing you'd better remember. You're young, so you can fall down once. You can maybe even fall down twice." He shook his finger in their faces. "But any man who busts three times in this squadron will be out of it within twenty-four hours. I've transferred a cook at three in the morning because he brought me a bad cup of coffee! Do your jobs, and learn, and then do more than your jobs, and you'll find you're in the best outfit in this or any other navy. Goof off and you'll be out of it fast. All right. Dismiss."

When the very impressed new men came out of the commander's office, they heard the returning rumble of the squadron's engines. Lieutenant Dupszyk smiled at their chastened faces.

"Don't worry," he said kindly. "You're going to like this outfit. Here are your assignments. Carter, you go to the PT 99. Collins to the 108. Cushing. You're the bug-eye boy, huh? I'm going to give you to Hugh Robb on the PT 107."

The PT 107! thought Larry. Man, oh, man! He was too excited to hear the other names read.

"Very well," said the officer, finishing his list. "You've turned over the orders and the service and medical records, Carter?"

"Yes, sir. I gave them to the yeoman in that office, sir."

"Good. Okay, men. All the boats are back except the 99. Hunt up your assignments, and good luck."

Larry had noticed that each boat carried a number in white on its canopy and turrets, and he prowled up and down the dock until he saw 107, the outboard boat in a nest of three. Then he went back for his seabag and hammock. He would have to cross two boats to reach his own.

Between each boat's forward and after torpedo tubes was a three-foot space, and he saw that fiber doormats had been placed there. He stepped from the dock onto the first mat. The boat moved a little beneath his weight. There was a deckhouse aft, about two feet high. Between it and the vertical thin steel walls of the cockpit was a narrow passageway. Larry paused undecided, and then walked all the way forward, around the slanted front of the canopy, and aft again to the space between the tubes.

A man only a little older than he was sitting on top of the canopy, disassembling a fifty-caliber machine gun. He nodded at Larry. A chop of small waves was coming in from the open end of the slip, echoes of the ridged wakes of hundreds of vessels crisscrossing the greasy waters outside. The boats were moving in the chop, the canvas fenders between them rubbing and complaining. He stepped onto the next boat and crossed it. Then he stood, just one moment, just one step, from the PT 107. His boat.

Her gray paint shone, and her plywood was without a stain. Her two turrets—one forward to starboard, the other aft and to port—were covered with canvas, the machine gun barrels making humps in the covers. The number 107 stood out on each turret and the canopy. A small blue flag with the number 3 flew from her tripod mast, and the American flag rippled from a staff at her stern. On the side of the canopy, forward of the cockpit, was a round wooden disk. On it was painted a large mosquito in a sailor's hat carrying a torpedo just above curling waves. Larry smiled at this emblem.

"You gonna lay an egg or something, Mac?" said a voice from behind him. "Go on and get on her if you're going to. If you ain't, then let me by."

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"I'm sorry." Larry stepped onto the 107. His shoulders were aching, so he lowered his gear to the deck and turned to see the man behind him. He was a little older than Larry, and much bigger. He wore skintight dungarees, a blue chambray shirt, and a white sailor hat tipped so far forward that it rested on the bridge of his nose. The eyes were small, the mouth big, the nose long.

"What are you doing on this boat, Mac?" The voice was unpleasant.

"I'm ordered aboard her," Larry said.

"Well, lissen to that." His questioner seemed disgusted. "We need real sailors and they send us shrimps from boot camp. Man, you gonna have a hard time on this boat. A man has got to be able to hold up his end of things."

"I'll do my share," Larry replied.

"You'll be sick in your bunk, hollering for your ma."

Larry started to answer this fittingly, and then he remembered having had to stand at attention for thirty minutes, back in training camp, with his white hat rolled into a ball and stuffed in his mouth. He had talked back to a chief petty officer. "Son," the CPO had said paternally, afterward, "that'll teach you to think before you talk. You got a little too much redhead in your temper." And anyway, this bird was going to be a shipmate.

"My name is Cushing." Larry had his hand half out. "I may get sick, but I won't holler."

"No? We'll see." The other ignored hand and name. He sat down on a torpedo tube, tipped his hat farther forward on his nose, and expanded his chest.

"Where do I go?" Larry asked.

"Where it's hot, for all I care," the other cackled. "I ain't here to nurse no boot."

"Oh, shut up, Peet," somebody said. Larry looked and saw a brown-faced man in clean dungarees standing in the cockpit entrance. "Hi, Mac," the brown-faced man said. "You the new seaman we're expecting?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't call me sir." The man grinned and stuck out his hand. "I'm Alex Lamb, gunner's mate. Welcome aboard."

"I'm Larry Cushing, seaman second class." Larry's hand was taken in a solid grip.

"We thought he was a chief boatswain's mate, didn't we, Alex?" said Peet with a cackle.

"Peet has had the big operation," Alex said. "They moved his ears to make more room for his mouth. I see you've got red hair, and maybe a temper, but the skipper don't like fighting. Don't pay any attention to Peet."

"Aw," Peet protested.

"Anyway, he's only a fireman, so he don't count. You know anything about gunnery?"

"I had a gunnery course after boot camp," Larry said proudly.

"Hot dog! Maybe I got me a real assistant. Bless Pappy Dupszyk's heart. Can you strip a fifty-caliber Browning?"

"Ycs."

"You know the Oerlikon twenty-millimeter?"

"That's the gun aft there, isn't it? The single one? I fired one once, but we didn't get to take it apart. Only watched a gunner do it."

"They're simple, and a mighty sweet gun. Hey, come on below and grab your bunk, get unpacked. Hungry? We got a good cook aboard. Here, let me give you a hand with that stuff."

This welcome made Larry's eagerness come back with a

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rush. Alex took the seabag and hammock and led the way into the narrow passage between deckhouse and cockpit armor, then through a shielded slit into the cockpit itself, a morsel of space about four by eight feet. A wheel was on the port side, in front of an instrument panel. Three throttles were just to the right of the panel. There were a few buttons and switches, but only a few. On the starboard side forward was a narrow wooden door. Alex swung it open, pushed the gear through, and went in, with Larry close behind.

This room was slightly bigger than the cockpit, and it was painted white. Two rectangular ports forward admitted light above a wide chart table that held drafting machine and lamp, and stretched the compartment's width. Two Thompson submachine guns and two sawed-off shotguns hung on one wall. To the left of the door was a blue leather chair before a mass of radio equipment. A blond boy was sitting in the chair, fiddling with one of the dials on the radio.

"That's Bill Russell," Alex said. "Radioman. Herc's our new scaman, Bill. A gunner striker, by george! Name's Larry Cushing."

"Glad to know you, Cushing. Going ashore tonight, Alex?"

"Sure. What time you want to make it?"

"Four o'clock, I guess, if the Commander don't get a wild hair or something. You know him."

"Yeah. Well, come on, Larry."

Alex lowered the gear down a ladder leading through a hatch under the door, let it drop, and followed. Larry went down the ladder into a clean smell of newness, metal, fresh paint, and coffee. At the right of the ladder was a luncheonette booth with blue leather benches.

"That's the wardroom," Alex said, noting his look of surprise. "That's where the officers are supposed to eat, but most of the time they sit with us up here."

Larry was pleased with the crew's quarters, a large, white-painted compartment, well lit and clean. Five leather bunks were at sitting height, with four more above them. The forward wall consisted of a bank of square lockers. Aft, a door led into a galley of stainless steel. A man was in the galley, and Larry heard coffee percolating.

"That upper bunk is yours. Hope you don't mind climbing," said Alex.

"I like an upper bunk. It keeps you out of the way," Larry answered.

"Danged right. People don't go sitting on a bunk and messing it up when it's five feet off the deck. There's your locker. Say, when you get unpacked take that hammock onto the barge and turn it in to the supply chief. You won't need it any more."

Larry felt happier by the second as he unpacked his things, including his windup phonograph and a stack of records. He looked forward beyond the locker wall and found a spotless washroom with three basins and three mirrors. To the right was the head, with two water closets. A ladder led upward to an open hatch. Someone walked on the deck above. The sound of footsteps was plain down below through the thin shell of plywood. Larry got his gear in order, changed from blues to dungarees, put his hat on square, and took the hammock out to the barge.

He had just turned in the hammock when somebody yelled, "Chow down! Come on, you apes!" There was a rush of laughing, talking men toward a long row of folding mess

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tables on the barge. Larry stood bewildered a moment, until he sighted Alex.

"Over here, kid," Alex said. "This is our table."

Larry met the rest of the crew, remembering some of the names, forgetting others. The food astonished him—thick steaks, three vegetables, coffee, milk, salad, pie with ice cream on top.

"This is a special day?" he asked Peet, whose chin was on his tray as he shoveled in great quantities of food.

"Naw," Peet said through a mouthful. "We eat like this all the time. Best chow in the Navy."

Larry believed him for the first time.

"You see, kid," said big, easygoing Blake Henry, the man in charge of the engines, "we only eat on the boat when we're operating. It's mostly sandwiches and soup then, and canned stuff. But we eat high on the hog here on the barge."

"What do you think of the boat, kid?" This was Mike Michaels, the torpedoman, a smooth-faced, very quiet man.

"She's really something!" Larry said enthusiastically.

Peet snickered.

"Pipe down, Peet," said Mike. "Larry's right. Do you know her dimensions, kid?"

"Why—not exactly."

"She's eighty-one feet long, twenty-two feet wide, draws three and a half feet forward, and six and a half aft, standing still. Making full speed and up on the step, she draws less, of course."

"Three 1,350-horsepower gasoline engines," added Blake Henry. "Carries three thousand gallons of gas, and at full speed that will last just five hours."

"Gee!" said Larry, properly awed.

"Four torpedoes, four depth charges, four fifty-caliber ma-

chine guns, and one twenty-millimeter Oerlikon," Mike said.

"Plus two Thompsons, eleven forty-five automatics, and two riot guns," the gunner's mate went on.

"And eight jackknives, two beanshooters, and Tubby Peet's big mouth," Mac Gordon, the quartermaster, put in.

Larry had finished eating and was just leaving the table when a tall man in khakis with a lieutenant j.g.'s silver collar bars walked up to him.

"Are you Cushing?" the lieutenant asked.

Larry nodded.

"Good. I hear you're assigned to our boat. Glad to have you aboard. Your record says you've had gunnery school. Mighty glad of that. You'll be Lamb's assistant, but remember that on a PT boat you have to learn everybody's job. Getting under way, you'll handle the bow and breast lines. Know what those are?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man. Say, Henry, do you think you've got those valve settings right now? We couldn't make over twenty-two hundred rpm this morning."

"I think so, skipper," Blake Henry said. "I'd like to give it a try, though."

"Okay. I'll see the Commander right away. Get the boys ready for a speed run in the lower bay. Ready for a PT boat ride, Cushing?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I thought you might be."

Ten minutes later Larry stood by the breast line, which was fastened by one turn around the cleat. This was the line amidships that held the 107 against the neighboring boat. Aft, all three motors were idling quietly, and blue smoke blew away in shreds. The acrid smell of the high-octane ex-

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haust drifted over Larry, making him eough. Lieutenant Hugh Robb stood in the coekpit, a eigar between his teeth. Lamb had the stern line, and now the skipper turned to him and lifted both hands, palms up. Lamb stepped aboard the next boat, lifted the line from a eleat, and came baek aboard the 107, whose stern began at once to drift away.

The skipper made the same gesture to Larry, who east off the breast line, threw it down in a tight heap, and ran forward to the bow line. A sailor on the other boat freed the end for him, and Larry dragged the line aboard smartly, not letting it touch the water. A buzzer sounded aft; the engines roared, broke, and settled, and the 107 began moving from the slip. The quartermaster lifted the flag from its socket aft on the fantail, ran forward, and hoisted a smaller American flag at the mast. Larry retrieved the fenders—white canvas saeks filled tightly with yarn—that had been hanging over the side to prevent the two boats from touching each other.

“Get the lines below, down the forward hatch, Larry,” Alex Lamb said. “Just dump them down. When we’re squared away outside, go down and coil them the right way. The skipper don’t like a messy thing on this boat.”

Larry dropped the armload of manila line down the forward hatch, closed it, and stood up. The boat had no rails or lifelines. The broad, flat foredeck, slanting a little to the towing ring in the stem so that it made a bull nose, seemed to stretch baek a long way to the canopy. She was at the head of the dock now, and the skipper blew a long blast on the air horn. He saw Larry watehing and raised one hand, thumb and forefinger circled, and grinned at him. Larry felt warm all over. This was so different from boot camp and gunnery school. There the intention seemed to have been to make

a man feel small and useless. By contrast, every person he had met since coming aboard the 107—except for Peet—had tried to give him the feeling that he was welcome and important. He had never felt happier in his life than at that moment. All homesickness and regret were far away.

The buzzer sounded again. The engines surged, ceased, and began a renewed and augmented rumbling with the third engine in gear. The boat moved forward as though pushed by an invisible hand. The bow turned downstream and lifted, while a low, white rooster tail began to appear in the wake behind. The PT 107 moved smartly off down the East River. Within moments she passed under the Brooklyn Bridge, her roar echoing hollowly from the underside of the broad bridge above.

"We don't run more than twelve hundred rpm in the river," Alex Lamb said. "If we went full speed in here, we'd wash half the tugboats in New York out on the bank."

The boat passed Governors Island; then the Statue of Liberty was ahead. Larry looked back at the amazing spectacle of Manhattan viewed from the lower bay. The jagged towers of Wall Street split the sky. Beyond them yet higher towers were visible in the blue haze. Ferries, ships, tugboats, and tows dotted the water everywhere, wakes crisscrossing. Larry stood with Lamb beside the cockpit, stretched as tall as he could stand, feeling excitement growing in him. The sun sparkled on the water. They passed a ferryboat, and aboard it people rushed to the rail to stare at the PT. Many of them waved.

"Poor buzzards," Lamb said pityingly. "Back and forth to the office, or wherever they go, same thing, day in, day out. Why, kid, ain't nobody knows where we'll go. Or what we'll be doing a week from now, or a month from now.

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Those birds up there, they know exactly what they'll be doing and where they'll be. I'd think they'd go nuts."

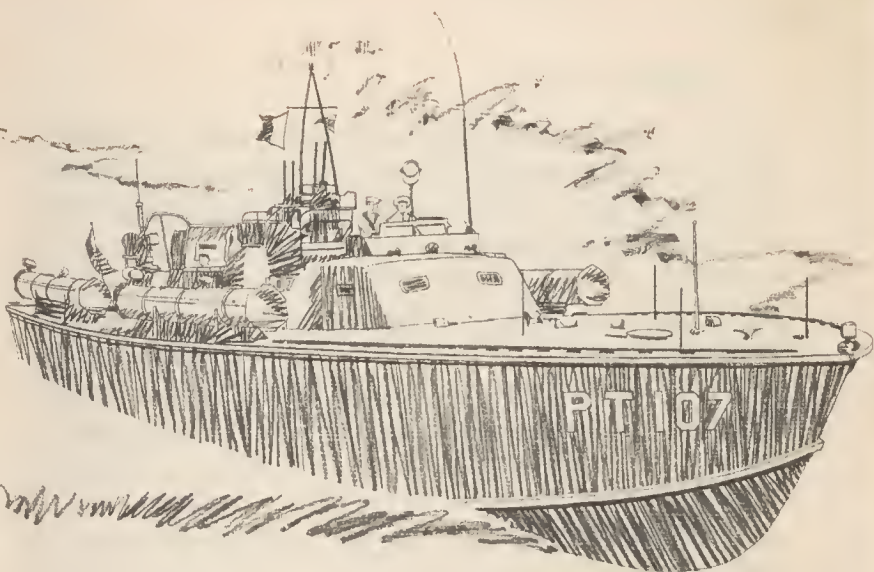
They were in the lower bay, past the Narrows and the square stone fort dotted with ancient gun embrasures. Lieutenant Robb put his hand on the throttles. The roar increased as the boat's stern flattened and her bow lifted. Wind became a wall of force rushing at Larry. His pulse increased with the engines' beat. The forward thrust of the boat rocked Larry back on his heels. Aft, the white spray rose higher and higher.

"Hang on tight!" cried Lamb. "If you got blown overboard, the lick when you hit the water would probably break your back. Hang on!"

Larry twisted his hands in the grab rail along the canopy and hung on. Faster, faster. The boat was a bolt of gray riding a surge of white. The wind howled, the motors roared louder, louder. The boat was hurtling now, flinging herself over the water. The bow was high, the whip antenna bending nearly horizontally aft. She ran over small waves, rocking, rocking, poised like a tiger making little leaps and preparing for a larger one. The rooster tail of white foam in the center of the wake hung twenty feet in the air. Larry felt drunk, raving, felt himself thrown over the water like a weapon.

"Wow!" he shrieked, not hearing himself over the engines. Lamb looked at him and smiled, eyes glittering. Larry looked at the skipper and caught his eye. Robb motioned to him to come inside.

"What?" Larry shouted, words torn away by the wind. Robb beckoned again. Keeping one hand grip fast, Larry slipped aft of the cockpit—shoved by the wind so that he had to hold himself back—into the space between cockpit



and deckhouse, across, and into the shielded entrance. It was a little crowded in there with the skipper, the executive officer, the quartermaster, the radioman, and Larry.

"Cushing!" shouted Robb. "You're a deck man, so you'd better learn to handle her. Here, take the wheel."

"What?" Larry heard, but he didn't believe.

"Take the wheel. Come on, it won't bite you!"

Larry stepped to the wheel. It wasn't much bigger than an automobile steering wheel, and a crank handle stood vertically out from the rim, like the button handles kids often put on their souped-up cars. He took the wheel in both hands, standing directly in front of it, not moving it either way. Surely if he swung the wheel too far, the boat would tip over at this speed.

"Don't worry," Robb shouted. "There's nothing you can do that would hurt anything. She handles like a V-eight. There. Try swinging her a little."

Moving the wheel experimentally, Larry found that the

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boat responded to the slightest movement, quickly, smoothly, alive. Her power surged through the wheel to his fingers. He began to grow drunk with the speed and force of a living and powerful thing beneath his hands.

"How fast?" he tried to ask. The skipper pointed at the three tachometer dials. All three needles hovered at twenty-six hundred rpm's.

"Fifty knots!" the skipper shouted. "We're light, you see."

Fifty knots. Nearly sixty miles an hour! Time seemed to stop, and the water streaked past like a shiny metallie wall of speed.

"Twist her!" shouted the skipper. "Turn right, turn as hard as you ean."

Hardly daring to do it, Larry spun the wheel to the right. The engines changed pitch sharply as the boat whipped and skidded around, banking into the turn like a fighter plane. They ground and roared as the propellers that were closer to the surface raced faster than the ones further under water. The boat came around in about twice her length and gathered speed again.

"Now straight," ordered Robb.

Bow up again, speed baek up again, she approached the four parallel ridges of her own wake. The first one. A poised, fast leap and she was flying! Larry's stomach curled up and died, just as in a vicious roller coaster. Interminable waiting—then crash! She hit the water. Up again, poised again. Crash! Spray flying aecross the wake, engines milling even faster, wind a sereaming enemy, water a flashing, vanishing thing.

"Ride her, boy!" yelled the skipper, sharing Larry's delight. Larry rode her. Power under him, around him, madness about him. All his life he had wanted to be big. Now

he was big. He had wanted to be a great athlete. Now he was great and powerful, living through eighty feet of flashing speed. Faster! Faster! Hurtling on, never stopping, not to be stopped, never stopped. Faster and faster, riding high, roaring down, echoing the feeling of surging triumph within him, the PT 107 roared on toward the open sea with Larry Cushing at the controls.

CHAPTER TWO

John Watanabe

Larry was very quiet, almost shaken, as the boat poked her bow into the slip by Pier H. He was still in the cockpit, though Ensign Walter Stone, the exec, had relieved him some time before. Larry's hands still felt unsteady. Man, oh, man, that had been a sensation. What a ride!

"Twist her, Walt," Robb said.

"Okay." Larry watched closely, for he wanted to know how to handle this baby. Stone brought all engines out of gear; then he turned the wheel hard left, with the port engine running astern, the starboard ahead. The wing engines muttered busily and the boat turned completely around without moving a yard ahead. Then Stone shifted both engines astern, backed briefly, and took them out of gear. The boat was standing close alongside the outer PT of their nest.

Larry scrambled from the crowded cockpit. He took the lines Lamb was passing up from below, handed the loop of the bow line to a waiting sailor, saw it go over the cleat of the sailor's boat. "Take a strain, Cushing," Robb said quietly. Larry took a double turn on his cleat; the line creaked a little and the 107 stopped moving. Larry carried the breast

line aboard the other boat himself and dropped the loop over the cleat.

"Okay, secure," said Robb. The buzzer shrilled, the engines roared once and subsided. Larry, as he always had done aboard the bugeye *Lucy Myers*, at once began flaking down the free ends of the bow and breast lines into neat, flat coils.

"Good work, Larry," Robb said when he had finished. "Looks like we've got ourselves a seaman, Walt. Do you like the boat?"

"She's wonderful, sir!" Larry answered.

"Yeah, the old 107 is all right. Glad you like her. Gordon tells me you've got the duty tonight. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Eager beaver," Peet muttered behind him. "Grease them up, boy, you'll make admiral yet."

"Peet, you take it tonight, too. Give him all the dope."

"Oh, bull," grumbled Peet under his breath. "Might know it. I was going over to Times Square. You got me into this, Cushing."

"I don't see how." Larry felt hot all over, but he tried to keep his voice reasonable.

"Ignore Fatso, kid," Russell advised. "It's his turn for the duty. Anyway, there's nothing to it. Handle lines if anybody wants to go out. Don't let anybody outside the squadron aboard. You stand a two-hour watch on the doek by the barge. Have you drawn your forty-five and helmet yet?"

"Why, no."

"Go see Alex Lamb. You'll need 'em on your doek watch tonight."

Larry went to Lamb at once, and the gunner's mate took him to the chart house and unlocked a drawer. He took out

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a blue, dully shining Colt forty-five automatic, clicked the slide forward, and peered through the bore. He wrote the serial number in a black notebook and handed the pistol to Larry. It felt heavy and cold in Larry's hand. Lamb took out a canvas web belt with a leather holster and a spare clip holder. Next came three clips, each heavy with its seven gleaming silver and copper bullets. He passed the lot to Larry. "That's it," he said. "Come on below. I might as well issue the rest of the gear."

Larry received a green poplin jacket lined with artificial fur, a steel helmet, a one-quart canteen, and a heavy, black-bladed knife. "See the blade?" Alex asked. "No shine. That's so it won't ever reflect light if you have to use it at night. It's a shark knife, too, in case you're in the water. Sharks strike at shiny things, you know."

"I see," said Larry, gulping.

"And here's your life jacket. It's kapok. Don't use it for a pillow, and don't get oil or paint on it."

"Okay."

"Keep the pistol and ammunition locked in your locker. The helmet and life jacket go on one of those hooks in the quarters. Stencil your name on both of them, and always know where they are. Always! Got it?"

Larry said yes, he had it, and Lamb clapped him on the back. Soon afterward Lamb went ashore, whistling.

Larry and his grumbling watch mate mustered ashore with the duty detail immediately after supper, in dungarees, jacket, steel helmet, and forty-five. The men from the 107 were to come back to stand the watch on the pier from midnight to 2 A.M. Peet said nothing until he and Larry were walking back aboard their boat. It was nearly dark. Across

the wrinkled waters of the East River, lights were appearing in clouds and drifts of jewels.

"Look over there," Peet said. "Manhattan—hottest town in the world. Think about all the girls walking around over there, lonesome, maybe. And here I am—on duty."

"Did you have the duty last night?"

"Naw. We get it every fourth day."

"Then why didn't you go over there last night?"

"You tryin' to be smart or something?"

"Say, Peet, what's your rate, anyway?"

"Fireman first class. You're a seaman second, so I outrate you. Got it?"

"Yes, *sir*, yes, your honor, *sir*," Larry said, bowing.

He knew that the difference between seaman second and fireman first wasn't worth a hill of beans, but there was no use arguing over nothing. He stopped and admired the Disney mosquito emblem on the canopy. Some of the men had cloth badges of the emblem sewed to the shoulder of their blue uniforms. He would buy one on his first liberty, and when he went home on leave he'd be wearing it. Maybe have an extra one for Gerry.

He felt sad and rather homesick for a moment, thinking of her. He'd had several letters, and the last had indicated that she was beginning to enjoy life as a freshman at the University of Maryland. "Let me know in advance when you're coming home, Larry," she had written, "and I will be sure to be there. I'm very proud of you. Daddy said that you are a fine boy and doing the right thing. It will be such fun when you are in the Naval Academy. I'll come every weekend—if you ask me to."

"Thinking about your girl?" Peet asked. "I'll bet she's hot stuff."

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Hot stuff! Larry felt his red hair lift on his head. "Look, Peet, watch your mouth."

"Yeah? Why?"

"You'll be better off."

Larry met the little eyes with his own, muscles tense. But Peet turned away, grumbling something, and went below. Larry looked around in the dusk. The boats were moving in the chop that came in through the open slip. A radio was playing not far away. He went into the cockpit and down through the chart room to the warm, brightly lighted crew's quarters below.

"Hi, kid," said the cook, Roger Long. "Like a cup of coffee? Picce of pie, maybe?"

"Gee, thanks, Roger, but I'm still full from supper."

"I ain't," said Peet. "What kind of pic, Rog?"

"Apple. Help yourself."

Hank Lamar, the second class motor machinist's mate, was lounging on a bunk, playing a harmonica. "Say," Larry asked of nobody in particular, "is it all right if I look around?"

Lamar stopped playing. "Sure," he said. "Like me to show you over the boat?"

"That would be swell."

"Okay. Guess you've seen the galley?"

"Yes, and the wardroom. That's something, isn't it?"

"It's not used much aboard here," said Lamar. "The skipper is a good joe, and I don't think he'd mind if I showed you his room."

He opened a door just aft of the wardroom and snapped on a light. Larry whistled. The skipper's room was about eight by ten feet, with a blue rug on the deck, a desk, chair,

wardrobe, mirror, and a bunk with a blue leather cover. All the space above the bunk was covered with books.

"Pretty nice, huh?" Lamar asked. "They share that wash-room."

"Just like ours," Larry said.

"Yeah. These boats are fixed up nice. There forward is Mr. Stone's room—it's a little smaller. Okay, now come on aft. Here's our dayroom. It's amidships and over the tanks, so it's about the steadiest place on the boat."

The dayroom was light and very clean. Its overhead made the deckhouse, and there were three oblong ports on each side, just at Larry's face level. A ladder led up to the hatch, and two long blue leather couches occupied the sides of the compartment. "We don't use it very much," Lamar said "but it's nice." He walked aft and undogged an oval hatch. "Take a look at that," he said proudly.

The engine room was dominated by three enormous black and silver engines, their size accentuated by the spotless white of the room. Larry studied the maze of piping and gear, bewildered. In the center of the engine room, under the hatch, was a metal tractor seat with three large levers in front of it, as well as an instrument panel with dials, switches, and gauges.

"That's the control point," Lamar explained. "The motor mac watches the engine indicators and listens for the buzzers. He shifts the engines into neutral, astern, or ahead as ordered on the indicators. Once the engine is in gear ahead, the speed is controlled from the cockpit with the throttles. Those things are the reverse gears. Those are the two auxiliary generators. They make electric current for the boat when the main engines aren't running. Those are

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the pumps. There's the heat transfer unit for the starboard engine—there's one for each. The engines have distilled water in the jackets. The distilled water is pumped through the exchanger and cooled there by sea water running over the coils."

Lamar looked at his watch, and then led Larry on deck again. "There's the hatch to the lazaret." He opened the hatch, and Larry saw a square compartment filled with lines, drums, spare fenders, and similar gear. "Larry, don't ever go down there when we're under way unless you're ordered to, and somebody stands right here and watches you. Exhaust gets in there, and that hundred-octane gas exhaust can kill you quick. It's the lead in it. Just breathing a little of it gives you an awful headache. A lot of it will either kill you or ruin your brain."

"I'll be careful."

"You'd better. The cylinder right at the fantail is the smoke screen generator. Turn the valve and some black acid stuff spurts onto the water, mixes with it, and makes a hell of a white smoke. It might come in handy to hide behind someday. Now, look over the stern, into the water. See the exhaust pipes? And notice those square gadgets leading down into the drink? Those are the mufflers. Turn 'em on in the engine room, and those flaps close, and that sends all the exhaust underwater, so that it doesn't make any noise. The only trouble is that we can't make more than twenty knots with the mufflers on because of the back pressure."

"She's some boat," Larry said.

"You bet she is. You know about the guns, don't you? Sure. Well, I guess that's the works."

"Mighty nice of you to show me around."

"Shucks, we're shipmates. You don't know what that means

yet, but someday you will." Lamar leaned against the aft machine gun turret and took out a cigarette. "Do you mind my asking you something?"

"No, of course not," Larry answered.

"You're sort of different from most of the seamen. One thing, you're at home on a boat—I can tell by the way you move and handle yourself. You sound like you know the Navy, too."

"I live in Annapolis, Maryland," Larry explained, "and I guess you sort of breathe the Navy there. I've worked four summers on an old Chesapeake Bay schooner—a bugeye, they call them. The skipper was an ex-chief boatswain's mate, and I guess he taught me a lot about the Navy."

"I see. That must be why you got PTs. Another thing, you don't talk like no boot. Most of the kids go to boot camp because they've quit school and couldn't find a job, or didn't like the job they found. I'll bet you graduated from high school."

"Yes, I did."

"How come you didn't go to college?"

"Dad died when I was ten years old," Larry answered. "The insurance has taken care of us all right, and Mom and the kids can get along on it. She wanted to send me to college, since she went and so did Dad. They wanted me to have the same sort of advantage. But I said no, thanks. I wasn't going to have her use up that money paying my way through college. I——" Larry hesitated. Maybe he shouldn't talk about this, but Lamar had been very friendly. "I've always wanted to go to the Naval Academy, but we don't know any congressmen. Chief Adams—the bugeye skipper—said I could maybe make it through the fleet. I could enlist, and then apply for the Naval Academy prep class. So at the

end of boot camp, I applied to enter the Navy Prep School. If I get that and make it through, I'll probably be able to get a fleet appointment to the academy."

"Well, I'll declare. That's it, huh. A fellow I know did that, he got to be a midshipman last year. I guess I'll be saluting that joker someday. Maybe you, too, Larry."

"What do you think about it?" Larry asked.

"I think it's a damn good idea, if you got brains enough. But I hear them midshipmen have a pretty tough time. You sure you want to do four years of that kind of studying, and take all that bull?"

"Pretty sure. I got good marks in school." Larry grinned. "Anyway, one of those midshipmen just about took my girl away from me last year. Took her to a dance, and showed up in full dress uniform with two rows of brass buttons, high collar, white gloves, and a corsage. I'd kind of like one of those outfits myself."

"Okay, admiral. I wish I had brains. Good luck to you." Lamar stretched. "Guess I'll lay below and get dressed. This New York duty is good liberty, only it leaves you broke all the time."

An hour later Larry and Peet were alone. Larry was happy as he covered the entire boat again, and when he came back to the crew's quarters Peet was asleep and snoring. Larry turned in as well. The men they would relieve on watch would wake them at eleven thirty. But for a long time he couldn't sleep. He lay there in his bunk with the white U.S. Navy blanket up to his chin. The bunk was a good one. The boat shivered now and then, occasionally rocking a little, reminding him of the swing on Gerry's porch. He thought back. Things had been tough for a long time now—

even at best, boot camp and gunnery school had been tough. Now things were good. He was at home. This boat and its crew were closing around him with a warmth that he recognized. Then, why should he feel homesick? Guess that's it, he thought. Because I'm in a good place now and I have time to think. That's why I miss Mom and the kids. And Gerry. Well, if things work out right I'll get to see them soon.

He lay there for what seemed a long time, but finally went to sleep.

After ten days of operations, squadron exercises, and drills, Larry felt as if he'd always been aboard a PT boat, and every day was good. He was even glad to see Monday come so that operations could start again after the weekend. He was happy and he knew it. But then he nearly spoiled it all by getting into a fight with Peet.

The only thing Larry Cushing really minded about being small—aside from the nickname "Skeeter"—was the fact that some guys couldn't resist the temptation to push him around, just because they were bigger. Not in malice, not trying to start a fight, actually, just pushing him around a little. In showers, locker rooms, on the field. The funny thing was, with some people he didn't mind at all—a rough shove, even getting sat on, could be a mark of friendship from the right guy.

But Tubby Peet wasn't that kind of guy. He tried to push Larry around because he could, and because he liked to—not because he liked Larry.

The fight started in the crew's quarters. Larry had just closed his locker door when he felt strong arms around his

waist, smelled the sweaty odor that seemed to emanate from Peet even after a shower, and felt himself lifted bodily from the deck.

"Why'n't you grow up, shrimp?" Peet snickered. "You look like you was raised under a table."

"Put me down!" Larry said.

"Oh, in a minute or two. When I feel like it. I—ugh!"

The "ugh!" came because Larry had backhanded Peet with his right fist, catching him on the nose.

"Hey!" bellowed Peet, dropping him. Larry caromed off the upper bunk and bounced from the lower like a ball, swinging as he bounced. He caught Peet on the nose again, and quickly ducked under the big boy's swinging fist. Then Larry went at it. He was quick and strong, and he landed two blows to Peet's one, but when one of the latter's round-house swings connected, Larry went down on a bunk with the compartment spinning around him. But he threw himself at his enemy again, almost sobbing with rage.

"Hey! What's going on here?" Lieutenant Robb demanded, drawn into the crew's quarters by the tumult. At the moment Peet had Larry down on a bunk, holding him and punching at him. Larry was blocking the punches with his arms and trying to get up. "Knock it off, you guys!" Robb strode up to them just as Lamar and Lamb came tumbling down from topside. Robb stood back to let them take over. They hauled Peet away and Larry came with him, swinging. Already Peet's nose was bleeding, and Larry landed a good one on his cheek. Then the two men were between them.

"Cushing!" Robb snapped. "Attention!" He didn't speak loudly, but his voice had a tone that brought Larry to his senses. He stopped struggling and stood, panting.



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"He hit me first," Peet whined. "See my nose, it's broke. He hit me on the nose."

"Is that true, Cushing?"

"Yes, sir," panted Larry.

"Why did you hit him?" Robb demanded.

"He thinks that because he's bigger than me he can push me around, sir."

"Aw, I was only kidding," said Peet. "He was leaning over, and I just picked him up and held him up in the air. I was just kidding."

"I don't mind my friends putting their hands on me," Larry said. "But nobody else. I warned you, Peet."

"That's enough," Robb said. "Do you men know that if I turn you over to the Commander you'll both be transferred? You'll be aboard the receiving ship before dark."

Larry turned pale, mouth open. Peet muttered something.

"Sir!" Larry said urgently. "Please don't do that. I'd hate to leave this boat, sir. I'll—I'll do anything!"

"Will you hold your red-haired temper?"

"Yes, sir. I'll try."

"He hit me," Peet said angrily. "I don't like living around a man that hit me."

"You started it, Peet," Lamb said. "Doggone it, I've heard Larry tell you before that he didn't like being pushed around."

"I was just joking!"

"It's not a joke to Larry."

"Cushing," Robb's voice was severe. "You are restricted to the squadron for one week. No liberty."

"Yes, sir."

That part didn't bother Larry much. Payday was a week away, and he was almost broke. Twenty-one dollars didn't

go very far. But he was still mighty shaky about the narrow escape from transfer.

A week later, just as Larry was emerging from his restriction, big, slow-moving Blake Henry was transferred from the PT 107 to a new squadron.

"You've got to expect it," Lieutenant Robb said to several of the crew who were griping about losing Henry. "He's a good engineer, and they'll need him in the other outfit. We've got to spread out all the experience we have. Anyway, Blake will probably make chief in the new squadron. You wouldn't want to hold him back, would you, boys?"

"Who'll we get to replace him?" Lamar asked.

"You," Robb said, grinning. "Aren't you about ready to try for motor mate first class? Sure you are. You're my engineer now, Lamar."

"Oh, oh," said Lamb, grinning. "We better get some masts and sails rigged—and a paddle for when we get up the well-known creek, with Lamar doctoring the engines."

Larry was pleased at Lamar's promotion, but not so pleased when Tubby Peet made motor machinist's mate, third class, and assistant to Lamar. But, as Lamb said, Peet was a good mechanic.

The crew of the 107 had formed the habit of coming back to the boat together after dinner each night. Roger Long always had a pot full of fresh, hot coffee, and the men sat around the compartment, relaxing with coffee and tobacco. It was a quiet and pleasant communion among them before most of the men got into their shore whites and went on liberty. Larry's phonograph was popular then: "Paper Doll" and "Stage Door Canteen" were great favorites.

Tonight, the coffee had just made the first round and "Paper Doll" was playing when Tubby Peet swaggered into

the room. His hat was even farther forward on his nose than usual. As he pushed across the compartment Larry saw that he really did have a noticeable pot beginning to bulge above his belt. His skin had a faintly greasy shine in the white light, and his arms and even the backs of his hands were hairy. A tuft of hair protruded above the V of his T-shirt, visible under the open-necked blue work shirt.

"Hear you made third class, Tubby," Alex Lamb remarked. "Good going."

"Minimum time as fireman first," Peet said in warm appreciation of himself. Lamar grunted and winked at Larry. Peet yanked open his locker door, hauled out a blouse with the Motor Machinist Mate 3/c insignia already sewn on it, draped it over his arm, the red V with eagle and anchors showing, and said, "Hey, I nearly forgot." He took a handful of cigars out of the locker and started handing them around.

"Not you, shrimp," he growled when he came to Larry. "Your growth's already stunted—these is for *men*."

"Yes, sir, aye, aye, sir, your majesty, sir," Larry said with great elaboration. He was surprised to see Tubby Peet almost grin.

The day after Peet's promotion, the skipper called Larry into his room. Larry was a little nervous, but he hadn't been in any trouble since the fight with Peet. Still, he gulped as he stood before the door and knocked. At the skipper's pleasant-sounding voice, he stepped in, hat in hand.

"Sit down, Larry," Robb said. He was in the act of changing his shirt, and he had the black necktie half looped around his neck.

"I've been wanting to tell you," he said, "that just between you and me, I don't blame you about the fracas with

Peet the other day. I've seen him horsing around with you."

"I just don't like it, sir," Larry explained. "I can take all kinds of teasing and playing around, but not from a man who's showing how big and strong he is."

"I understand. But for your own good, you've got to learn that fighting is a serious offense. Okay, now here's something else. We're getting a new fireman. He's being transferred from the 102. He's an American-born Japanese."

"I've seen him a couple of times," Larry said. "I've never talked to him. He doesn't seem to talk much."

"No. I'm afraid some of the boys on the 102 boat have been giving him a hard time—because he's Japanese, of course. Well, I won't have that aboard this boat. We've got a good crew here, Larry, and I think you'll all give him a break."

"I sure will, sir."

"That's what I want. You and John Watanabe are about the same age. He's a fireman second class. You look after him, kind of adopt him for a while."

Larry was troubled. He hesitated, then decided he had better say it.

"He'll be working under Tubby—I mean Peet, sir. Won't that be a little—"

"I'm afraid so. But I'll keep my eye on things, and Mr. George Peet had better take it a little easy. But you know, Cushing, there's just so much anybody can do, even the commanding officer. Watanabe will have to earn acceptance, I guess, like the rest of us."

Larry left the room in a thoughtful mood. He had just realized something. George Peet knew he wasn't well liked on 107. Maybe that's where all his bluster, his bragging, his show of strength came from—an attempt to gain accep-

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tance. Larry almost felt sorry for him, but remembered his experiences with Peet and muttered, "Not George Peet—not him. I can't."

Larry was waiting on deck a little later when he saw a short, slight figure carrying a seabag, a suitcase, and several packages coming across the two inboard boats. Larry went to meet him.

"Hello," Larry said, speaking into a sad and unmoving face. It was perfectly smooth, unwrinkled, old and young at the same time. The eyes were dark and slightly slanted, the bone structure flat between them. The brows were thick and black, the dark hair cut very short. The eyes gripped Larry, mostly because they expressed nothing—opaque, unchanging. They looked at Larry as if he were danger approaching.

"Hello," the man said, his head bobbing a little.

"You're John Watanabe?"

"Yes."

"I'm Larry Cushing. I'm the seaman. Here, let me help you with your gear."

"I can carry it very well indeed, thank you."

"Sure," Larry said breezily. "But I'd like to help. Here, let me take the packages."

He reached for them and felt the dark eyes on his for a moment. It was like bumping into a wall in the dark. Hurt, Larry drew back.

"Well, all right," he said. Cripes, this guy wasn't very friendly. No wonder he hadn't gotten along. The dickens—no, wait. He had promised Lieutenant Robb he would look after this man. He smiled into the flat eyes. "Whatever you say, Watanabe. Come on, I'll show you your bunk and in-

roduce you around. You'll like our boat." He started to lead the way to the cockpit.

"Larry?" said the precise voice. Surprised, Larry looked back to see the dark eyes suddenly warm, a slight smile on the face. "Thank you. You are kind. If you will?" Watanabe handed Larry the two packages and followed him onto the boat. That's better, Larry thought. He must have been nervous coming aboard. I guess they gave him a hard time on the 102.

"Here's your bunk," Larry said, placing the packages on it after leading the new man to Peet's old bunk, empty since Peet had moved into Blake Henry's place. "That's your locker up there—I'm afraid it isn't very clean right now."

Larry was embarrassed by the sight of orange peels, an old sock, and a candy wrapper in the open locker. What a jerk that Peet was. Larry hauled out the junk and carried it to the GI can. The cook stuck his head out of the galley.

"Hey, Roger," Larry said. "Here's our new fireman—John Watanabe."

"Bound to be an improvement," Roger replied. "Cup of coffee, Whatanobby?"

"Watanabe, sir. No, thank you, please."

"Don't call me sir—and ain't that what I said? Whatanobby?"

Impassivity shut down on the fireman's face, and then he smiled. "That is right. That is the way to say it."

Larry winked at Watanabe. He was glad the guy could see that Long was being friendly.

"Can I help you get settled?" Larry asked.

"No, thank you, but I would be very glad if you would stay here and talk to me."

"Sure. Glad to."

John Watanabe was just Larry's size, perhaps a little heavier, and he moved like an athlete. The talk that followed, as Watanabe unpacked, made his bunk, and stowed his locker, told many other things. The Japanese boy was seventeen, Larry's age. He had been born in California and had lived there all his life. He had been on the swimming team in high school and had tried to play football, but the coaches had said he was too light.

"I guess you do need weight for football," Larry agreed with sympathy. "I played football a lot. Our high school wasn't very big, and I'm pretty fast on my feet. I got in a good many games. We were playing Redfield once and I managed to get through a hole in their line. Then their halfback—he was a great big bum—tackled me, and instead of knocking me down he picked me up and ran with me. Showing off, you know." Larry laughed. "It wasn't funny then. My girl was in the stands watching."

"What did you do?" Watanabe asked.

"When he put me down I hauled off and socked him one in the eye. I got in two or three good licks and then they pulled us apart. I remember the big bum just hollered, 'Hey, ref, get this mosquito out of my hair! He's pestering me!' I got thrown out of the game, and we lost it. I expect we would have lost it anyway."

"You should have hit him on the back of the neck—right there—while he was carrying you!" Watanabe's eyes snapped. "They would have carried him out of the game. To make a man small so that he will be laughed at, that is not good."

Larry was shaking his head dizzily and rubbing the back

of his neck. Watanabe had barely flicked a certain spot with the weight of his fingers, but Larry still felt numb.

"I will show you—Larry." Watanabe sounded rather shy.

"I'd appreciate that—John," said Larry.

Watanabe smiled, put out his hand, and they shook hands again. "It is good to have a friend," he said, still shyly.

Larry felt embarrassed. He looked up at the fireman's locker. "Is that your family?" he asked. The picture on the door of the locker was a family group: a small woman, a girl, a man wearing spectacles, and two boys.

"Yes. It was taken about five years ago, just before my father and my brother went back to Japan. I was almost thirteen years old and my brother was fifteen."

"How long did they stay in Japan?"

"They are still there," John answered.

"Oh?"

"My father went to see his father, who was old, and he took his firstborn son with him to show. He was coming back in one year, but he died very suddenly. My brother was taken into my uncle's family, and he is still in Japan."

"I'm sorry, John. My father is dead, too." They looked at each other a moment in new kinship. "I guess your brother must like it in Japan, since he stayed on."

"Japan is not like America," Watanabe said sadly. "In Japan a person cannot do whatever he wants. My mother has told me, many times. They would not let my brother leave Japan. When he was seventeen years old they took him into the army. We have not heard from him since."

"You mean they just kept him?" Larry asked.

"I guess so. He wanted to come back, and they would not let him. The American consul could not find him. Always he

seemed to be traveling somewhere. The Japanese police pretended to help, but I think they did not try." The eyes grew darker and emotionless. "I am glad I am an American!" John Watanabe said fiercely. "In our country, Larry, a man is not made to do what he doesn't want to do or should not do! In Japan, if an officer says to a man you do this and that, the man does so."

"We have the draft in this country," Larry pointed out.

"A country must be defended!" Watanabe exclaimed. "That is a man's duty. That is why I am here. There is trouble in the world. In many countries men in uniforms kill other men, or imprison them, beat them, just if they want to. We must not let that happen here, Larry. We Japanese have a saying, 'You cannot fight a dragon with a feather.' America must have dragons, too."

"Yeah," Larry said slowly. "I guess you're right."

Larry liked all the men on the 107, except maybe Peet, but he began to feel a special friendship with John Watanabe. Their size, their age, their views on things drew them together. The rest of the crew accepted John after several weeks of operations and training had shown that he was always ready to help anyone who needed a hand. Furthermore, he was good with the engines.

It pleased Larry to feel that he had had something to do with Watanabe's acceptance. With Larry's friendship to build on, the Japanese boy had managed to overcome the morose, silent set-apartness that had cost him so much on the PT 102. As a result, most of the men on the 107 no longer saw him physically as a Japanese.

Unfortunately, this acceptance was not shared by Tubby Peet. He showed in many ways that he didn't like Watanabe. He muttered phrases, only half heard by anyone—"slant-

eyed Jap," "dirty yellowbelly." Combined with a gruff, unpleasant manner toward the boy in all matters of work, these things made Peet's attitude clear. Watanabe never mentioned it to Larry, but the latter could tell that it hurt his friend deeply. Fortunately, Hank Lamar's quiet, easy authority was more than sufficient to handle Peet, and he kept his assistant from doing any real bullying. The crew knew how Hugh Robb felt about such things and, with the skipper's authority in the background, Peet walked very easily and waited his chance.

CHAPTER THREE

The Friends

One night Larry and John had the midwatch together, and were standing on the end of the long Pier H. Behind them were the PT boats and the barge, with one or two lights shining. The summer night was clear and warm, and, even in the mass of concrete, buildings, and machinery that made up the navy yard, it was all about them. Its green warmth seemed to overcome even the everlasting smell of cooking chocolate that hung over this part of Brooklyn.

Larry had received a letter from his girl that day, and he felt like talking about her. He missed Gerry a lot. On some nights like this, she had kissed him, and let him kiss her. The memory of those kisses grew stronger with the warm July night, and Larry's knees felt weak, and breathing became difficult. Maybe he would be able to get home on leave before long.

He didn't tell John anything about how sweet Gerry's lips were, of course. But he did tell John some of the crazy things she sometimes said.

"What is she like?" Watanabe asked.

"Oh, mostly she's just fun. Nice, and kindhearted I guess is the word. She would never laugh at anybody."

"That is very good," said John.

"Yeah. She never minded that I was short. She always wore flat heels when we went to a dance so I'd be taller than she was. She has light brown hair and blue eyes."

And a dimple that showed when she smiled, Larry remembered. And in a bathing suit she was——Larry's palms grew warm again at the thought. Two big maple trees grew in Gerry's front yard, and the deep porch was equipped with an old-fashioned wooden swing. He'd spent a lot of time in that swing with Gerry, particularly in the summertime when katydids were calling and lightning bugs drifted in the dusk. On nights like this one—but there sure weren't any lightning bugs or katydids on Pier H in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Actually, Larry was a couple of inches taller than Gerry. It was just high heels and hair styles that made her look taller sometimes. They both had blue eyes—that was something in common—but his hair was red, and hers was that nice light brown with sunshine tangled in it, or that was the way it looked.

"I guess the thing I liked most about her was that she was sort of crazy," he went on. "In a nice way, I mean. Not silly like some girls." He thought for a moment. "I guess there was one thing she did——one of the fellows in our class at high school had folks with a lot of money, and he gave a really wonderful party during our senior year. His dad rented the yacht club for an evening and hired an orchestra. Not a big one, just a little combination, but, man, they were smooth. Gerry and I were invited. Everybody in our class was invited except Clara Hudson."

"Hmm," said Watanabe, softly but sharply.

"Gerry and Clara weren't good friends. They didn't even like each other much. But when Gerry heard about Clara, she refused to go to the party. She said she and I and Clara and one of the boys from the junior class would have our own party at her house. I was kinda mad at first—I was all excited about that big party. But I guess I will always stick with Gerry. Anyway, that's what we did, and I think it helped Clara a lot. I hope so, anyway. I sure would have liked to go to that party at the yacht club."

"I can understand. I like parties, too, but I can see that Gerry is a very nice person."

"Oh, she's all right," Larry said, blushing in the night at the monstrous understatement. He didn't want to sound mushy about Gerry to John Watanabe.

The weeks went by rapidly, with training becoming more and more urgent and liberty ashore an exception rather than the rule. The squadron made a run to Newport, Rhode Island, one day. The west winds didn't blow, and Long Island Sound was blue with small, regular waves, so they went quickly and at good speed, going through maneuvers on the way. Larry came again then to the cool, salty wind, the gull cry, the horizon, the motion that meant for him being at sea. John Watanabe laughed into the wind, but Peet became quiet and didn't talk much.

"When we go out and lie to at night on maneuvers outside, you'll see his hair hanging over a torpedo tube like a mop on the end of a blown-up mop handle," Alex Lamb said, grinning. "I don't think he feels so good even today."

The squadron spent a week at Newport test-firing and loading torpedoes. Mike Michaels, the torpedoman, was busy

day and night testing, checking, maintaining. Larry was put to work helping him, and he soon developed a lot of respect for Mike and for the delicate, infinitely complicated weapons he handled.

These torpedoes had warheads, and the thought of those four red painted objects hidden in the tubes, those twelve hundred pounds of TNT, made the younger crew members mighty thoughtful. They knew the war was on. They knew the Navy was having a pretty tough time out in the Pacific, but somehow they really hadn't *believed* it. Now they did. Another dimension was added when detonators were put in place in the warheads and impulse charges stored in the compartmented boxes fixed to the dayroom canopy, where they would be tossed about less than anywhere else on board.

Larry began to realize that this frail boat with all the TNT and three thousand gallons of high-octane gasoline was really a highly explosive device, a little less complicated than the torpedoes themselves, since men were aboard to handle it and think for it. This was a bleak thought for Larry, but he gulped and accepted it.

The night maneuvers came next—long nights pitching madly, moving slowly, lying to off Ambrose Lightship in the cold Atlantic winds. Wet with spray, buffeted by the cruel motion, sick, hungry, the men began to learn about the less sunny parts of the PT sailor's life, and they toughened day by day.

Target practice showed that Larry had a natural eye for marksmanship, and the skipper assigned him to the forward machine gun turret as his battle station. Alex Lamb, the gunner's mate, handled the twenty-millimeter Oerlikon aft, with John Watanabe as his loader. The cook was assigned

to the after machine gun turret. Larry took his two machine guns apart nearly every day, oiled them, and cleaned them until Lamb accused him of trying to wear them out. He liked the turret. The heavy twin guns swung easily in their Bell mounts, each gun flanked by a metal can that held 250 rounds of half-inch-thick bullets in linked metal belts. Back at the navy yard, Larry spent many hours at a mess table on the barge with the belting machines, belting up the spare ammunition. One ball, one armor piercing, one tracer.

Larry would never forget the first time he fired the guns. The battles of Coral Sea and Midway had been fought, and there was a feeling of great things brewing in the Pacific. But it seemed make-believe to him when he stood braced in the turret, the boat rolling steadily over the swells as he trained the twin guns toward the red balloon drifting into the blue sky. He pressed the firing bars and felt the riveting, steady bucking, well controlled by the mount. A burst of five, pause, another burst, pause, watching the smoking tracer, up more—good. Now left—fine. Another burst. This one seemed to hit. Another burst—hah! The balloon vanished, leaving a dark trace of falling shreds of rubber.

"Well done there, Larry," said the skipper, grinning. "Early liberty for you tonight."

But it began to rain on the way in. The clammy September night settled in on them, and the towers of Manhattan across the river were veiled in drifting fog and low clouds. Larry stayed aboard that night, as did most of the crew. The PT 107 was a home. Unless a man had a wife ashore, or a girl waiting for him, the warm, dry, pleasant crew's quarters seemed more attractive than wet, dank streets.

Larry was reading a book and playing his phonograph. Peet was playing solitaire on his bunk. John Watanabe was

reading an engine manual. The gunner, the torpedoman, the engineer, and the quartermaster were having a game of poker at the mess table. "Why'n't you call my bluff, Mike?" the quartermaster asked aggrievedly. "Don't you know there's a war on?"

"You better bet I know it," said the torpedoman mysteriously. "You guys are gonna know it, too, before long."

"Whaddaya mean?" came the reply.

"The chief yeoman told me a while ago that there's an urgent, priority dispatch up at the communications office for the old man. Wanna bet we won't be hauling out of here pretty soon? We're ready."

A sudden quiet dropped over the compartment. Everyone stopped all motion to gaze at the torpedoman.

Larry felt an inner contraction. Priority, top secret, action! Were they shipping out already? How about that leave home he had been counting on? He felt the slight bulk of Gerry's last letter in his pocket, and his hand slipped in to close about it.

"Well," Alex Lamb said. "We've all known we'd go sometime. I think we're set. By the Lord, I'm ready to ship out! But I wonder where to?"

Just then Hugh Robb stuck his head in the doorway. "Watanabe," he said, softly. "Can I see you in my room for a minute?"

"Why, sir, yes, sir," John Watanabe said, getting up from his bunk. The men looked at each other. There was nothing unusual in the skipper wanting a private talk with a man about something or other, but the air of sadness, almost of shame, that had seemed to hang over Mr. Robb had them all puzzled.

"Damn yellowbelly," Peet muttered.

"Shut up, Tubby!" Hank Lamar snapped. "Use some common sense."

"I dunno," said Roger Long. "It almost looked like the skipper didn't want to talk to him, really. Wonder if he's in trouble or something."

A few minutes later they could hear Robb's voice outside his room. "I'm sorry, Watanabe. You know I am. Take it easy, and try to realize what the score really is."

They heard Watanabe's muttered reply, too low for his words to come through, and heard his feet on the ladder rungs leading topside, then on the deck heading across the boat for shore. Larry heard the skipper sigh deeply and go back into his room. He got up from his bunk and went topside. Something was wrong.

"John!" he called. "John, where are you?"

He looked all over the boats and on the dock and the barge. But John Watanabe had disappeared.

After a while Watanabe returned, silent and cold. Larry tried to make clear to John that he was indeed his friend, but he found a wall between them, like the wall that had been there for the first minutes of their first meeting. Watanabe got into liberty uniform and left the boat. Tubby Peet pretended to be keeping his full interest on his game of solitaire, but Larry noted that he watched Watanabe out of the corner of his eye.

"What are you holding your neck like that for, Peet?" Mack Gordon, the quartermaster, asked.

"Ah, just sort of sprained it, I guess." Larry realized now that Peet was holding his head cocked a little to one side.

"Heard you and Watanabe wrasslin' around in the engine room," Hank Lamar said. "I told you not to pick on him."

"Ahh, I just shoved him out of the way and told him what

I thought, and he talked back, and I started to give him a little arm twist, and all of a sudden he hit me on the back of the neck. Musta had a monkey wrench in his hand. Felt like it, anyway. You been telling me to lay off him, like you said, so I let it go. I'm gonna ketch him ashore and mop up the street with him sometime."

"Like about now?" Alex Lamb asked sweetly. "He just went. You can catch him by the time he makes the main gate."

"Ahh," said Peet, moving his neck around a little, and bent to his cards again. Larry remembered John's finger tips on his own neck that day, and grinned to himself. Then the grin disappeared. John had been distant and morose for several days. Larry guessed Tubby was really getting the guy down. He decided to be especially nice to Watanabe when he got back from liberty tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOUR

Departure

Early the next morning all the personnel of the squadron, boat crews, barge crews, everybody, fell in on two long ranks down the pier. Larry was alarmed, beginning to feel panic. John Watanabe hadn't returned yet. Already he was absent over leave; if he didn't make it back soon he'd be absent without leave. AOL would get him in trouble—restrictions and extra duty. AWOL could get him locked up. Officers called the men to attention, and the Commander came striding down the dock, his executive officer behind him, the chief yeoman behind the exec. The Commander's first words drove all the thoughts of Watanabe out of Larry's mind for a moment.

"From now on, no more liberty, except for emergencies, or for men with families in town—that is, if the men can be spared from the squadron for a couple of hours, which is doubtful. Our orders have come in." He paused. Even through the naval discipline the murmur of whispers, ejaculations, exhaled breath rose over the ranks of men. It ceased instantly as the Commander went on.

"All you need to know is that we're heading south, not

east. The first two tankers will be here in forty-eight hours. They will take Division Three, under Lieutenant Robb. The others will follow within a week. I want every boat totally ready for loading. Get any repairs that need doing done. Get all gear aboard. Get spares and supplies checked and ready. Base crew will go on the *Drake* and *Gasper*, the first two tankers. The medical corpsmen will check all records for yellow fever, cholera, and tetanus shots. We will be in the tropics in a hot action area, and I want every man healthy, every boat cleaned and in good shape, every gun working, every torpedo ready to run hot, straight, and normal. Okay. That's all. Get busy. Dismiss."

Larry didn't know whether he was coming or going as he moved out to the 107 with the rest of the crew. A funny choked-up feeling was making it hard to breathe. In one week, he had been going to have a seven-day leave. He had been going to see his mother, his family—and Gerry! Now that was all off. In a week he would be at sea in a tanker, the 107 fastened to her deck, and under way for the war. When would he see his mother again? When would he see Gerry again? Things were blurring a little bit, and Larry shook his head, stuck his chin up, and made his mind start thinking about his gun mount, the things he should have aboard in the way of spares.

Everybody was quiet, but when they reached the boat Larry heard Mac Gordon talking to Lieutenant Robb.

"What about Watanabe, sir? He's AOL, isn't he?"

"He's got a family ashore—an aunt and uncle, I think—and I gave him a twenty-four."

"That's funny," said Mac. "He told me an overnight liberty. Well, sir, of course that makes it different."

Robb started down the ladder, hesitated, and looked over

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his shoulder. "Larry," he said, "come on down to my room. I've got a job for you."

When Larry closed the door behind him, he realized that Robb was disturbed. It couldn't be about the orders, so it must be John Watanabe.

"It's hard to tell you this, Larry," the skipper said slowly. "You heard what I told Gordon. It's not so. Watanabe was due back from liberty at eight this morning."

"Yes, sir," said Larry, feeling funny.

"I did it for him because I think he's a good man, and because he's been having a pretty hard time lately. Peet has been very unpleasant to him, but I think that pretty nearly worked itself out yesterday when Peet found it wasn't so healthy to fool with the boy. Oh, I know what goes on—unofficially, that is." Robb smiled. The smile vanished at once.

"Well, he's AOL now. I'm afraid he might make it AWOL. He may not even plan on coming back at all. You see, Larry, the squadron got a message yesterday to inform Watanabe that his mother's address was changed from La Jolla, California, to a little place in Colorado. She has been sent to one of the relocation camps for Japanese-Americans.

"But that's crazy!" Larry said, suddenly very angry. "What could she do to hurt this country? She wouldn't even if she could! Why, John says she insisted on his enlisting in the Navy because of what the Jap government did to his father and brother! What's wrong with people out there in California, anyway?"

"They're afraid, I guess," Robb said sadly. "Well, now you know why I want to give Watanabe a break. Here's the address of his aunt and uncle—up on Lexington Avenue. If

he's not back by ten o'clock this morning, I want you to go there and get him. I could send the police—and if you don't bring him, I'll have to—but if you can bring him back, everything will be all right. I'll give you authorization to leave the squadron and the yard on duty. Use your head now, Larry. I think he likes you and will listen to what you have to say."

An hour and ten minutes later, Larry went out through the Sands Street gate of the navy yard. He had his orders in his pocket, and some money for transportation. He was sad, sorry for John, and very disturbed. If Watanabe did stay away, that would be desertion. If he missed the 107 when she sailed, that would be desertion in the face of the enemy, or nearly so. Larry gulped. He wasn't sure, but he thought men could be shot for that! Certainly John would go to prison for a long time. He *had* to make him come back.

The streetcar up grimy Sands Street, the subway at the St. George Hotel, past South Ferry, up the Seventh Avenue line to Forty-second Street. The great clanging cavern, the line of red bulbs leading to the shuttle, Grand Central, then the Lexington Avenue subway. A final tunnel, scrawled things, show placards, advertisements, gum machines—ordinarily Larry hated these scars of city life and the dank heat of the subway, but now that he was leaving it all he felt nostalgic about even this. He emerged on Lexington Avenue, as usual not knowing what direction he was going until he found the street signs.

The apartment house was shabby but clean, with small shops on the first floor. The elevator was slow but cared for. The apartment door had been painted recently, and the hall, though stuffy, was clean. Larry knocked, waited, knocked again. He heard faint sounds, and finally the door

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opened on a chain and dark, worried eyes looked through. The woman was small, with gray hair.

"Yes?" she said, with a slight sibilance.

"Is John Watanabe here, Mrs. Mikura?"

"I know no John Watanabe." The door started to close.

"Wait!" Larry cried out, loudly. "I'm his friend. I'm Larry Cushing!"

The door closed, but Larry was sure his words had penetrated the apartment. With his heart thudding, he stood before the wooden barrier, hoping, fearing. What should he say? What could he say?

The door opened, and John Watanabe was there. He wore civilian trousers too big in the waist, a white shirt, and an old sweater. He moved aside, and Larry stepped into the living room.

Mrs. Mikura stood by the window, wringing her hands, her face impassive. John looked sullen, gloomy, dark.

"What do you want?" he asked. Larry's planned speech slipped from his mind. He let his feelings take over.

"John! I'm your friend! This is Larry! Look, I heard about what they did to your mother. If they had done it to mine, I would desert, too, I think. I wouldn't want to fight for the country that did that. But I ask you—be more than I am, better than I am. This is the way to get your mother free as soon as possible. To get everybody free!"

"And the Japanese people?"

"Didn't you say they needed freeing, too? Come help us do it!"

For a moment Watanabe's eyes showed life. Then they dulled again.

"I am absent over leave. The Commander will transfer me out of the squadron. Maybe they will put me in jail."

"But you're not AOL! Mr. Robb told the quartermaster that he had given you a twenty-four-hour pass. That's not up until eight tonight! And John, we're shipping out! We're leaving in forty-eight hours! You've got to come back!"

"Mr. Robb said that? But it isn't true. He didn't give me a twenty-four-hour pass."

"He knows about your mother. He is mad about that, too, the same as I am. We're both ashamed, John. Mr. Robb knows about Peet, too. And he's glad you walloped him in the engine room yesterday afternoon." Larry grinned. "What did you do, hit him on the neck the way you did me? He said you used a monkey wrench!"

Suddenly John laughed, hardly more than a chuckle, but the ice was melted. "With the side of my hand—not the way I touched you with my fingers. But, Larry, I will come back. Mr. Robb is a good man, and if he believes in me that much, and since you do, I will come back. But you must help me, Larry! Sometimes it is very hard."

Mrs. Mikura was smiling now, seeming vastly relieved. She made the boys stay for lunch, and when they left together, both in uniform, she kissed Larry at the door.

"I would not make him go back!" she said. "Nor would his uncle. But we both think it is right he should go. And we will always be grateful to you, and to Mr. Robb. Good-bye."

By two o'clock they were back aboard the 107. Their arrival caused no flurry at all, except for the slow wink Robb gave Larry and the unobtrusive touch of the skipper's hand on his shoulder. Watanabe slipped quietly back into the boat's routine, which had dissolved into a steady, round-the-clock dedication to having everything on board ready for the loading onto the tanker's deck.

The word came through on Thursday.

"Okay, boys," said Lieutenant Robb. "Wind 'em up—we're on our way."

The announcement came as a relief. The waiting was finished. Larry felt funny as he took in the bow line and heard the three big engines break into their familiar roar.

It took only a few minutes to get to Pier G. Once there, the 107 began the delicate procedure of being hoisted aboard the tanker.

First there was the cradle, the support in which the PT 107 had been built. It had to be adjusted to her hull to support her in precisely the right places. For PTs, with their mahogany frames and their three-eighths-inch-thick mahogany planking, had to be lifted with great care. The 107's cradle was in the water alongside the pier when the boat approached, lowered there by the great hammerhead crane. Yard workmen standing on the side of the cradle motioned the PT boat forward. Carefully, gently, the skipper eased her bow into the framework. Men took the lines from either side, the crew joined in, and they walked the boat into just the proper place in the cradle. The marks on her sides corresponded exactly to marks on the cradle. A whistle blew and a man on the dock made a signal. The crane began to lift the cradle, slowly, easily. As it rose, the 107 subsided into the supporting framework precisely, to the inch, in the position she had occupied when being built. The crane halted. Straps were put in place and tightened. Then, with her crew aboard, the PT in her cradle was lifted up to fall gently into place on the starboard side of the *U.S.S. Gasper's* forward well deck.

To Larry it was a strange feeling to stand on the familiar decks, now high in the air, and look over and down onto the pier some thirty feet below. He watched welding

torches fling blue arcs of light into the day's gray air. Within an hour, the cradle was welded to the deck. Lines and shackles that could be released quickly held the PT boat in the cradle. After another hour the PT 108 was in place on the port side.

Dusk had fallen now, and New York was fading around them. Soon the grayness was contrasted by brilliant strings and flowers of electric lights. Larry found it equally strange to go below to the crew's quarters and find everything unchanged. Electric leads had been plugged in and the coffeepot was chuckling away on the stove in the galley; the lights burned as usual.

"Remember, you guys," Mac Gordon said when the crew had assembled for a cup of coffee. "We eat in the tanker's forward crew's mess. We use the forward crew's head. Not ours. No running water aboard. We'll sleep here, and Mr. Robb has fixed it so we stand watches in our own boat, and do our cleaning and drills here. Okay, let's show the sailors on this ship that PT men know how to behave. Keep clean, stay out of trouble, keep the boat clean. We'd ought to have a pretty easy trip."

Larry gulped again at realizing that this would be the last night in port. He was glad of John Watanabe's friendly silence alongside him. There would be no liberty, and in the morning the two tankers would sail. Larry knew of the carnage occurring up and down the coast. He hoped they would make it, but he knew that many ships didn't. Lieutenant Robb, noting the silent, preoccupied faces of his crew, guessed that part of the reason was the deadly highway this tanker must travel. He tried to reassure them.

"Boys, you can relax for the first few days. This tanker is empty. A submarine isn't likely to attack her. If it did, it

could hardly sink her. You see, all the tanks are just so many flotation chambers when they're empty. We ride high out of the water, and no sub captain could fail to notice. He'll save his fish for a loaded tanker or a cargo ship. We'll join a convoy at Norfolk, and fill our tanks somewhere in the Caribbean. I don't know where. After we're full of oil and gasoline, then you can be seared. I will. Then you can sleep in your clothes and life jackets, and stay on deck all the time. But for a while you can take it easy. Relax. Okay?"

Larry felt partly relieved, partly seared. He hadn't realized that Hugh Robb could possibly be frightened of anything. He believed the skipper could relax now. But later? Larry whistled to himself and met John's thoughtful eyes.

"I think I wanna go home," Larry said mournfully. John grinned, and then they both laughed together. The call of the boatswain's mate piped over the public-address system: "Now hear this! Chow down! Chow down!" They went below to the crew's mess for a solid, if rather confused, meal.

Larry didn't sleep well that night; he missed the quivering, alive movements of the boat in the water and the lap of the wavelets against her side. Everything now seemed solid, motionless, dead. He had dreams when he did sleep, and they weren't happy ones.

Morning was chilly and gray with rain as the PT crew fell in on the forecastle for roll call before going down to breakfast. Since this was a PT boat, after all, nearly every man brought a cup of coffee topside with him. Mae Gordon called the roll of the little group of nine men, and then turned to Lieutenant Robb, who had showed up even though it was only six in the morning.

The skipper looked them over with a sharp eye. "Peet, get a shave and a clean shirt before you go down to breakfast.

Mike, maybe you'd better get a clean hat—that one's got paint on it. I'm not trying to make a battlewagon out of this boat, but I do want you looking neat when you go down that ladder to the deck. Exeept when you're working, of course. We're back in the Navy, boys, no more 'hooligan navy' habits—this is a United States Navy tanker. At quarters, at eight o'elock, fall in on the foreecastle. We're right under the bridge, so Captain Wood has us under his eye, and I want that quarters formation to be orderly. Two ranks, spaced, and hold still. Decent clothes, no beards. All that comes later."

Larry could hear Peet muttering under his breath, but ignored him.

"We'll fall in at quarters for getting under way whenever the word is passed," Robb went on. "I'll give you a little speech then. Something to look forward to, huh? Okay, dismiss—such as it is, you bums. Roger, how about a eup of that coffee?"

Breakfast stuek in Larry's throat as he thought of what lay ahead. He had always dreamed of the South Seas—now he was going there. As he forced down his serambled eggs, brown bacon, toast, jam, and coffee, he realized that there was no rationing here. Coffee, sugar, bacon—these things were becoming rare for civilians in Ameriea. Even gasoline was rationed—Larry grimaced, realizing why—for many tankers were being sunk along the East Coast. No one should use that gasoline for mere pleasure, he silently agreed.

Many men were still at the mess tables when the word came brassily through the public-address system. "Now hear this. Stations, all special sea details. Stand by for getting under way."

John Watanabe jumped a little. Larry felt it like a blow in the stomach. From his summers on Chesapeake Bay he knew the strange feeling that could come from leaving a familiar dock and town. He had a strong hunch, reinforced by others of the crew, that these boats might well be headed for the Guadalcanal area. He knew that the American invasion there was running into trouble. He had heard that Guadalcanal provided an ideal operating area for PT boats. That was ten thousand miles away—the Southwest Pacific—across the international date line. Larry would see, between two ticks of the clock, a dying day transformed to its own morning—the great puzzle of man-made time. He was genuinely excited.

The PT crews had come to the mess hall together, gotten into the same part of the chow line, and sat at the same mess tables. They had expected, and received, a certain amount of raillery from the tanker's crew.

"Say, Mac," said a grizzled boatswain's mate to Gordon, "what's this, the Sea Scout table?"

"It ain't a table full of floating gas station attendants, anyway," Gordon said, grinning. "How about cheeking my oil, Mac?"

"Why, you toy-boat sailors!" said the boatswain's mate in deep scorn. "You couldn't make nothing but the captain's gig in my last ship—the old *Lexington*. Whattaya do when you want to anchor—pull on the emergency brake?"

Gordon was collecting his answer when the speaker drowned them all and changed everyone's thoughts.

"Now hear this! All hands to quarters for leaving harbor. All hands to quarters for getting under way."

The rain wasn't heavy, more of a mist. But it was chilly, and the PT men wore their foul-weather jackets and

pants when they fell in on the boat's forecastle. Across the river, the tops of the towers of Manhattan were hidden in low clouds. Lieutenant Robb and Ensign Stone, also in waterproof pants and parkas, stood before the crew and took Mae Gordon's report of all present.

"At ease," Robb said quietly. "I think this is the time to put things in perspective, boys. We're going to take off for a hell of a trip. We don't know where we're going exactly, but it will be somewhere in the South Pacific."

"Gwoddaneal, maybe? Whatever they call it?" asked Hank Lamar.

"Might well be. I don't know. It all depends on whether or not they get done there before we arrive. Probably it will take us a month or so. But wherever it is, things won't be much different than they are in Guadaleanal."

"Pretty tough there, ain't it, skipper?" asked Roger Long.

"Yes. It's tough everywhere out there. Here it is. Pearl Harbor—a mess. You know. The Philippines lost. The Japs winning everywhere. We got licked in the Dutch East Indies. The Japs had it their own way everywhere. *Prince of Wales*, *Repulse* sunk. Singapore gone. Japs getting oil, rubber, tin, gold, everything they needed. Reaching for Australia. Then came the Battle of the Coral Sea. Remember? A standoff as far as losses, only the Japs pulled back afterward. Then Midway. That battle changed things, boys. Four Jap carriers sunk, the balance regained in the Pacific, or almost.

"Because of Midway, we were able to go on the offensive, and we have done it at Guadaleanal. The landings were all right. We did okay. Then the next night we had some mighty bad luck. You know—Battle of Savo Island. We lost four cruisers, three American, one Australian. Since then

the marines on Guadalcanal have been holding on with their fingernails, underfed, undersupplied, bombarded nearly every night. It's touch and go there, boys."

The skipper looked over his men and nodded slightly. Larry tried to control the cold lump of fear in his stomach.

"Europe is bad," Robb went on. "England has survived, and now she won't be invaded. We'll win this war, but the Germans hold just about all of Europe, except for Switzerland and Sweden. And Spain, but Franco is fascist at heart. The British are winning now in North Africa, but they won there once before, and then Rommel and the Afrika Korps chased 'em all the way to Alexandria.

"It's the way Mr. Churchill said. The only thing anybody can offer you is 'blood, sweat, and tears.' But we've got a good boat and a good crew. We'll do our share, you can bet on it, and we'll come through and come home. I'm glad to have all of you with me."

George Peet gave a silent Bronx cheer, and Larry was madder at him than at the Japanese. He had been feeling inspired.

"Okay, boys," the skipper said. "That's all the talking. Now let's get this show on the road."

It was happening. The line-handling party on the dock broke from its ranks and went to the various lines. A tug's harsh whistle broke the morning; another answered from the tanker's stern. There was a hiss of steam, the sight of lines flying through the air, men casting off wires from the great bollards. The bow of the *Gasper* was swinging away from the dock. There were no bands, no waving crowd—just a few sailors and workmen watching from the dock. The line party doing its job. Rain pelted down, spattering on the decks and foul weather gear. The last line came in; tugs

whistled, steam blasted, the pier fell away. In moments the tanker was out in the open river. The tugs went back; a bell sounded faintly from the bridge above. The tanker's decks vibrated and through them the PT's decks. The mast climbed toward the bottom of Brooklyn Bridge and then fell away. They were in the river, heading for the ocean.

The captain kept everybody at quarters for a while longer. Larry decided that he wanted them to see the Statue of Liberty in the lower bay as they went by. The great statue was poised against the mist in the dirty bay ridged with wakes. Rain came down. Larry felt as if he wanted to cry.

Larry grew up on that voyage. The two tankers sailed safely through the waiting submarines along the East Coast and in the Caribbean. The Panama Canal was a gateway to the great emptiness of the South Pacific. The passage from New York to Nouméa, New Caledonia, took a month. There, the PTs were placed on their own. Like small chips lost in a great blue sea, the four boats pounded and thrashed their way northward, toward Guadalcanal. At Espiritu Santo, Larry and his shipmates were made most solemn by the sight of wrecks of cruisers and destroyers, ships mangled in recent actions around Guadalcanal.

It was early November when, after a twenty-four-hour, high-speed run from Espiritu to San Cristobal, where they had refueled from drums on the deck of destroyer, and after another night of fighting through squall-swept seas, the crew of the PT 107 saw the end of their voyage.

"What island is that, skipper?" Roger Long asked, pointing at a high, green island on their left.

"Guadaleanal," said Lieutenant Robb, not smiling at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Base

The four PTs bent on twenty-five knots, then thirty as they headed for the island of Tulagi and shelter. The blue sky was marked with high, billowing clouds, and the sun glinted on shining objects high above Guadalcanal. Planes! The crew of the 107 watched them sharply.

"Hope they're ours," muttered Long.

"Probably are," Robb said. "No shooting going on over there. But let's go to battle stations, all the same. Can't tell what might drop out of one of these clouds."

Larry was very glad when the quartermaster found the Tulagi entrance through his binoculars—two small lights set in inconspicuous pylons on the shore. An entering vessel needed only to line up the lights by night, the pylons by day, and keep them lined up to get through the narrow channel. The PTs swept close by a lovely little island, not more than an acre in size. It looked like a picture of a South Sea island: graceful trees, ferns, whitebeach, slow surf from the PTs' wake. Then they were inside the reef and turned northwest. To the right were two islands, once possibly beau-

tiful. Now their palms were all cut off at the tops and shredded by gunfire, the red earth turned up in masses as if by plows.

"That one's Gavutu," said Robb. "A thousand men were killed there on D day, a lot of them our marines. The Japs are still there, boys, every one of them. None surrendered. In the end, the marines blew up the cave entrances and left them there."

Larry shuddered. He looked over at Watanabe and saw that his face was unutterably sad. He reached out, touched his friend's arm, and smiled. Larry was shocked to see tears in the Japanese boy's eyes.

"I feel sorry for all of them, Larry," he said. "Ours and theirs. War is a terrible thing!"

"You said it," Larry agreed.

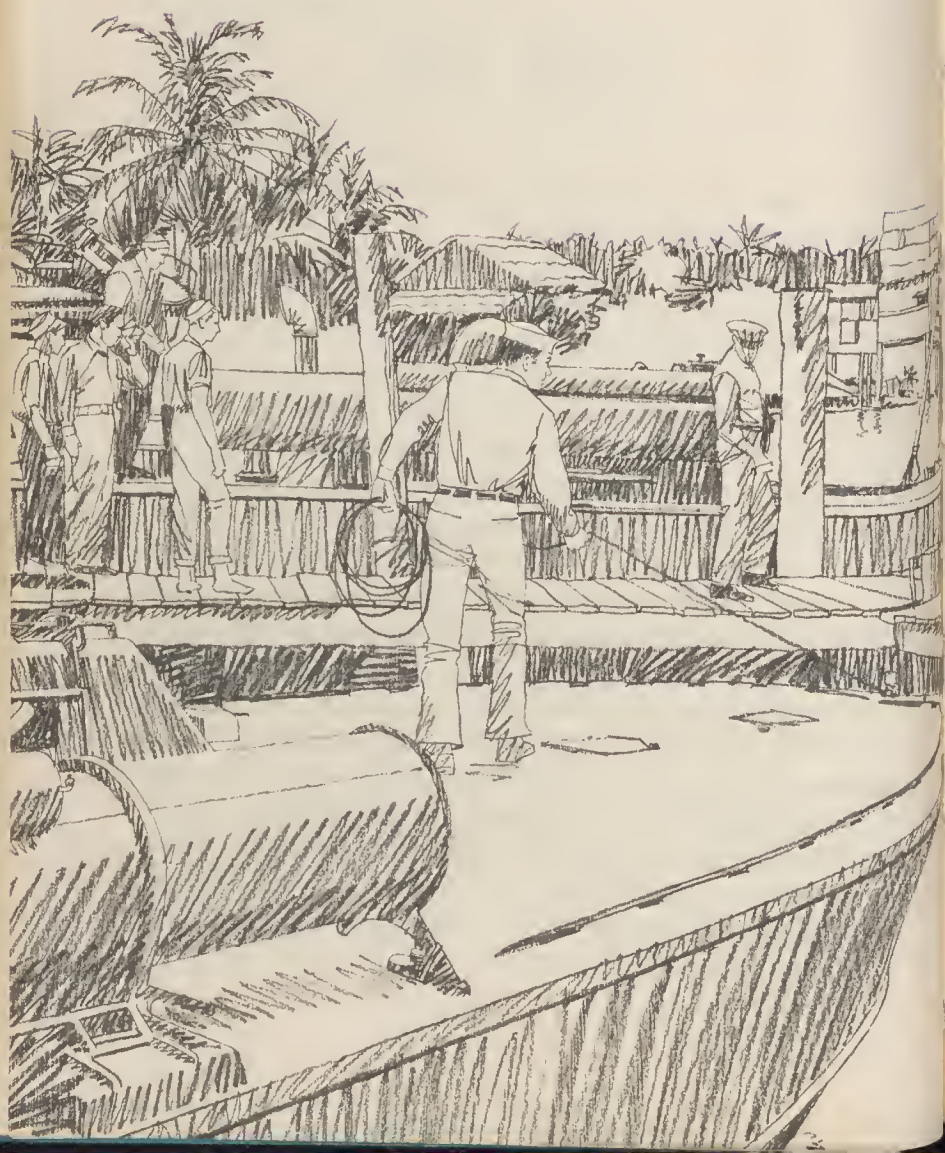
Another island on the right, Tanambogo. Backdropping all of the smaller islands were the rising hills of Florida Island, smothered with jungle. It was beautiful but ominous, Larry thought. He felt so far from home, so very far. Lost—but no, not lost. His friends and shipmates were with him.

Now a steep, high island was on their left, shutting them in from the open sea. That was Tulagi. Around its second point, under the high loom of an almost vertical cliff, was a narrow shelf of level land and a very narrow beach.

"That must be the PT base, boys," Robb said. "The place is named Sesapi. Yeah. There, I see a couple of boats. And a floating drydock, PT size—with a boat in it. Good—must be cleaning the hull to keep speed. A lot of shacks."

"There are a lot of tents, too, up the hill from the boats," Larry said.

"Right," Robb replied. "Okay, Mac, I'll take the wheel



now. If anybody in this boat is going to make a crash landing with those guys over there watching us, I want it to be me."

The PT slid neatly alongside the rough dock, where a growing crowd of tattered scarecrows stood watching them, ready to take the lines, obviously happy to see the four new boats. Feeling self-conscious before these veterans, Larry was particularly careful with the bow and breast lines.

"My, don't he look clean and sweet?" one bearded ragamuffin asked another, who had a green face.

"I bet he don't even smell bad, well, not very bad," returned the other, hitching up his shorts made of chopped-off dungarees.

Other remarks flew thick and fast, all good-humored and all with obvious gladness behind them. Lieutenant Robb went ashore with the other three PT captains, met several officers whom he appeared to know well, and disappeared with them.

Larry knew that these men had been here a month at most, but they all seemed to bear a certain stamp—an air of ingrained weariness ignored through self-control but revealed by hollow cheeks and eyes. There was a thinness about them, but a readiness to laugh, too; and Larry got the impression that many were sick men who should be in bed but would not go there. In a little while Robb came back with the other boat captains and gathered his crew on the forecandle.

"I know you didn't get any sleep last night, and I know you're tired, but that can't be helped. Our squadron commander got here two days ago by plane from Nouméa. The other boats will be coming up soon. We've got plenty to do.

We'll be quartered in that native village over there on the point. Now, don't squawk before you're bit. Mr. West, who is in command of the other squadron here, says the native village is a lot more comfortable than this place or the *Jamestown*, the PT tender. They've got army tents and cots over at the village. We'll eat on the *Jamestown* mornings and evenings, and down here at noon chow on working days, which will be every other day."

"What happens on the others days?" drawled Roger Long. "No work?"

"You'll have been out on night patrol," Robb answered with a tight grin. "They let you sleep during the day after, if you can. They tell me you don't get much sleep out there, that's why they call it Sleepless Lagoon, and I guess you have to catch up sometime."

"Now. Strip ship. Get rid of everything we don't really need and stick it on the dock here. Lamar, get all the engine spares onto the dock. Spare barrels, clips, magazines go, too, Alex. Torpedo tools as well, Mike. The base force takes care of all torpedo maintenance and handling, as well as engine work. Boat crews will maintain their own boats otherwise. Remember, don't keep anything aboard you don't need. We want the boat to be light."

"Why's that, skipper?" asked Lamar.

"They tell me that we're sure to be chased out there by a Jap destroyer sooner or later. And they come close to making forty knots. You want to get run over?"

"Wow!" said Long. "Say, cap, we better get rid of Tubby here. He's the heaviest thing on the boat, except for them four-hundred-pound depth charges."

"Aww!" Peet protested.

"Shaped about the same, too," Larry put in, only to be rewarded by a glowering look from Peet.

After that exchange the crew willingly turned to the job of stripping ship. The 107 looked empty when they had finished, but she did float higher in the water. That job done, they took the boat up the creek that ran into the bay across from Sesapi. All the men looked with interest at the native village on the point as they went by. It was a pretty place. The ground was grass-covered except for a brown strip of tidal mud. A small brook ran through the center of the village, and tall royal palms grew here and there all through it. It was a shady place, yet the sea breeze was not impeded. Huts of varying sizes were scattered throughout the grove.

The creek now ran through the jungle, the trees forming walls on either side. Then the left shore dropped sharply and became mangrove swamp.

"In under there," said the bearded, green-faced man Larry had noticed on the dock. "See them other boats? Tie up alongside the first one."

"Why do we go in there, Mac?" asked Roger Long. "Don't them trees shut off the breeze? And ain't that swamp full of mosquitoes?"

"Yep, both ways," the man said in a pitying tone. He shook his head. "Wait until the first air raid, then you'll be damn glad you can't be seen from the air."

The 107 turned in toward the swamp. The outer rows of mangroves had branches stretching out over the water, seeking sun, and the boat would just fit under them. They made a complete shield between boat and sky. Larry helped make the boat fast to a PT already there and then looked around him.

The mud bottom could be clearly seen some ten or twelve feet down. Toward land, the swamp stretched as far as he could see, with pools of water, muck, more water, and the thickly growing mangroves.

"This is a good place," Bill Wisdom, their pilot, told Larry. "There are some Jap soldiers ashore on Florida Island, but they can't get at the boats through the mangrove swamp. A man can't move in that stuff. And planes can't see you. Except when they're getting worked on at the base, all the boats stay in the bushes like this during the day."

"Hey, Mac," Peet said, coming up to them. The ominous feel of their surroundings had quieted Peet down somewhat, but he seemed recovered now, and his white hat was tipped down over his nose in the old smart-aleck way. "How come you look green in the face?"

"Dengue fever," was Bill's brief reply. "Takes you that way. This is a day off from the shakes, so I can work a little. Every third day I'm flat on my back with a temperature so high it blows the mercury out of the thermometer, only Doc Lastreto don't even bother with that anymore. Says it scares him too bad to see all the guys with temperatures that should be fatal." He laughed, but it was more of a croak. "Some call it breakbone fever, and, man, it sure does feel like it."

In half an hour a Higgins landing boat came by, picked up the men from the 107, and took them farther up the creek to the *Jamestown* for the noon meal. A quarter mile above the swamp, the creek opened out into a round bay about two hundred yards across. The tender was tied up against the left bank, snuggled in against a cliff. She was covered

with camouflage netting that had palm fronds woven into it, and a few small palm trees were even stuck into her decks and bridge. She had once been a large luxury yacht. Now she was a gray, hardworking PT tender.

Her mess hall was sealding hot. Running with sweat, Larry ate his Spam and potatoes and got out into the air as soon as he could.

Larry liked the native village on first sight. The shade and breeze seemed to lower the temperature many degrees, and the sound of running water from the little brook accentuated the feeling of relative coolness. Lieutenant Robb and Ensign Stone took their gear into a native hut, a thatched-roofed affair on four-foot-high stilts, while the crew pitched two tents in a grassy, shady space just across the brook. Then they put up their army cots, and each man placed at the head of his cot the wooden locker ripped from the crew's quarters on the 107. Larry put his windup phonograph on top of his locker and put on "Paper Doll" a favorite of the crew.

Certain ominous things reduced their feeling of release, of camping out in a beautiful place. Even in the shade and the breeze, it was hot. Thin, listless men occasionally walked by. Each man had to wear his forty-five at all times, and all hands would do tours of sentry duty. All of this made an impression on the newcomers. They laughed a lot, but were quiet between their spells of laughter.

Later they followed the brook upstream a hundred yards and found a waterfall and round pool where they could swim. Other PT men were there. All carried their forty-fives, and two men stayed on the bank at all times. One of them carried a Thompson submachine gun. It was a

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lovely spot, but Larry became a little afraid of it when he was told that Japanese soldiers were still on the island and perfectly capable of killing any unwary sailors they might find.

That night Lieutenant Robb went out on patrol with Commander West. Larry had not yet seen his own squadron commander, who was settled into a stateroom on the *James-town*. He had been over at Guadaleanal for the past twenty-four hours conferring with General Alexander Vandegrift of the Marine Corps and Admiral Kelly Turner.

The night was quiet, but Larry had trouble sleeping. Strange birds called from the jungle. Insects buzzed about his mosquito netting, and something kept splashing out in the creek. Once a plane flew over, very low, and Larry, along with every other man in his tent, sat up ready to grab his pants and boots and run for cover if firing and bombing began. But the plane's motor died away. It had sounded strange, uneven, light, and Larry was sure he had heard a Japanese plane.

They went out to the boat in the morning to check everything and clean ship. Lieutenant Robb joined them there for a while. He was hollow-eyed from the loss of two nights' sleep in a row, but he greeted them cheerfully.

"Everything all set, Mac?" he asked Gordon.

"Yes, sir. We're ready to go."

"That's good. We have our first patrol tonight." Robb hesitated. "Commander West says they'll be coming down some time before moonrise. They don't come down during moonlight because they think the Henderson Field dive-bombers might catch them."

"Uh, when's moonrise?" Tubby Peet asked in a voice he tried to make casual.

"Two-thirty in the morning," Robb said. "I'm going over to hit the sack. Right after the noon meal, all of you guys turn in. Sleep as much as you can. Rest, anyway. You'll be out all night."

It was a working day, so they ate the noon meal at Sesapi. Beans and Spam on a hot aluminum tray, hot coffee, cold water. In the chow line, a corpsman handed out Atabrine pills, small yellow objects that might avert and would certainly lessen the effects of malaria. Each man had to swallow them under the relentless corpsman's eye. Larry finally had to crunch his two pills up dry and swallow them. They were so bitter he could feel his hair curling and his tongue turning to a piece of gnarled root.

A Higgins boat took them to the village. The crew went at once to the two tents. Larry felt a strange stiffness, an unreality as he gazed around the little space. Already it seemed cozy and homelike, especially when he thought of the coming night out on the dark waters. He, Watanabe, Alex Lamb, Roger Long, and Mike Michaels, the torpedo-man, lived in this tent, but the rest of the 107's crew were only a few feet away. For Larry, the unity existing in this group of men, including Tubby Peet, was the one strong thing he could hold on to.

He attempted to sleep in the blazing heat, and awoke with a sticky, sick feeling in his mouth. He took a swim in the pool. Then he dressed, remembering the instructions: black socks because white attracts sharks, long sleeves and trousers to guard against flash burn. Canteen and forty-five. Helmet. His life jacket was on the boat. He put his shark knife in the web belt that supported the pistol. His hands shook a little as he checked the pistol's magazine.

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"Let's go, boys," said Robb, peering into the tent. "Higgins boat will be by in a minute. Larry, what are you looking so green for? Dengue fever already?"

Larry grinned feebly. "I always used to feel this way before a football game, sir."

CHAPTER SIX

Gunfire!

At supper on the *Jamestown* Larry didn't know what he ate. Afterward he and the other patrol crews rode down to Sesapi on a PT that had come up to the tender for fuel. The base men had already taken the 107 and the other duty boats down to the docks, where they waited with torpedoes, guns loaded, and tanks one-third full of gasoline. They would not need any more for the night patrol, and the lighter the boat the faster she could go.

Hugh Robb went into the command shack with the other officers, while the crews waited on the dock in the deepening dusk. Time stood still. Night became black velvet, unmarked by lights except for an occasional glowing cigarette or cigar. Larry went on board and down into the chart house, where he found Mae Gordon studying the chart of Guadalcanal and its surrounding waters. He seemed glad to see Larry and tried to explain the battleground to him.

"This is Guadalcanal, see, stretching northwest. Halfway up this north side is Lunga Point. That's ours. We have the naval base there, and a few miles inland is Henderson

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Field. While we hold Henderson Field and Lunga Point, the Japs can't push us off. So we got to hang on."

"Yeah," said Larry through dry lips.

"Five miles north of Lunga Point, here, is Domo Reef. It looks like a whale, they tell me. It's a good navigation point at night. Ten miles farther you come to Cape Esperance. The beach is smooth, and the water's deep right in to shore, and that's where the Japs land their men and supplies. You'll see a couple of beached Jap transports there to-night. Don't holler when you see them. They're done for.

"Now, over here, eight miles off Esperance," Mac continued, "see that peanut-shaped island? That's Savo—friendly territory. The natives there will help you out if you get there—if the boat gets sunk."

"Yeah," said Larry. He swallowed.

"Now, this hunk of water between Savo Island and Cape Esperance is Iron-Bottomed Bay. Larry, there are a lot of ships on the bottom of that bay, and maybe twenty or thirty thousand men have gone down there. Isn't it awful? They say it's a real pretty stretch of water, but it's full of sharks, and they are supposed to be pretty well fed."

"Hope we don't swim in it," Larry said.

"Yeah. The next point north of Esperance is Visale, and the bay beyond it is Kamimbo. Between those places and Savo, and in close all along the Japanese coast, that's where the PTs patrol."

"Now I know," said Larry. "Thanks, Mac."

Mac started to say something, but the rumble of approaching PT motors silenced both of them. That could only be the duty boat returning from Guadalcanal with orders for the evening patrol. They looked at each other and went on deck. The rest of the crew were there. When Watanabe saw

Larry he moved a little closer to him. Larry couldn't think of much to say. Something in his throat was bothering him, and whatever it was he had eaten for supper wasn't sitting very well. Then Peet moved near them—they were the three youngest men on the boat—and Larry waited for the unpleasant remark he had come to expect. But Peet was silent. Larry heard him swallow. When Peet took out a package of cigarettes he even offered it to the other two.

"No, thank you," said Watanabe politely. "I do not smoke."

"Mc neither—George," Larry said.

Peet forced a laugh. "That's right, I forgot. Well, it's a good thing for kids like you not to smoke."

A little clump of men walked briskly down the dock. The skippers and executive officers were coming. Larry could feel the wave of suspense run through the crew. None of them had been in action before.

The skipper stepped aboard and joined the crew on the forecastle, just forward of the cockpit.

"Okay, boys," he said pleasantly. "Here's the dope. There are ships coming down." Nobody spoke or moved. "Coast watchers report nine Japanese destroyers, two cruisers, position eighty miles northwest of Cape Esperance, course one hundred and twenty-five degrees, speed twenty-five knots. Time of arrival off Esperance, about ten-thirty, based on present course and speed. Moonrisc is at two-thirty in the morning, and they'll plan to be well away from Guadalcanal before that time. Russell?" Robb turned to the radioman.

"Yes, sir?" said Russell, clearing his throat.

"Our call is Prep Hugh—we use the first names of boat captains. Panama code—know it? Domo Reef to Aruligo is

Union Club, and that's where we patrol, close in. Aruligo to Esperance is El Rancho. Cape Esperance to Savo is Kelly's Bar. Friendly ships are Sally. Enemy ships Josephine. If one of the boats calls out 'Josephine in El Rancho,' that means enemy ships in the area just north of us. And we head in. There will be no friendly ships in the area."

"You mean—all of them ships, them destroyers and cruisers, are our'n?" asked Roger Long in an outraged voice.

"All ours, boys, all ours. We patrol with Prep Bernie, of Squadron Two. Eight boats are going out—all that are ready to go. Well——" Robb hesitated. "It's tough," he said quietly. "But we'll make out."

"Sure," said Mac Gordon easily.

"Okay, wind 'em up, Lamar. And remember that four buzzes means take off mufflers, fast! Mike, remember that two shots on my forty-five means make smoke until you hear me shoot twice again. I'll holler, too, but you may not be able to hear me."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Mike very quietly. He was a quiet, easygoing fellow, anyway, and he didn't talk much.

The PTs made a noisy column down Tulagi harbor, through the entrance, and out into Sleepless Lagoon. As soon as they cleared the entrance, all mufflers came on and the rumble of engines ceased. The 107 ghosted along quietly, with only a mutter from astern and the slap and wash of water from the bow. The eight boats split up into pairs, each pair heading for its patrol area. In a moment, the only other PT in sight was Prep Bernie, some fifty yards abeam. Her wake glowed a dull green from phosphorescence, and Larry, glancing astern, saw that their own wake was alive with green fire. Tiny particles of light, some like comets, tumbled and danced in the bow wave as well.

"Man your battle stations," Robb said quietly. "Keep your eyes open for planes and ships."

Larry tied his life jacket tighter, fastened his helmet strap, and rolled down his sleeves. He climbed into the forward turret and snapped loose the twin fifties. He rasped the charging handles forward and let them clang back, placing a heavy shell in each chamber. Then he clicked on the safeties and stood ready.

He was alone in the turret, but it was only a few feet from the cockpit and he could hear what was going on. Roger Long was in the other turret, to port and aft of the dayroom. Alex Lamb manned the twenty-millimeter Oerlikon on the fantail, with John Watanabe as loader. Mike Michaels, the torpedoman, was in charge of the torpedoes, the depth charges, and the smoke screen generator. Bill Russell, the radioman, Mae Gordon, the quartermaster, the skipper, and Walter Stone, the exec, were in the cockpit. Hank Lamar and Peet were in the engine room aft, concentrating on the three great engines.

Alone in the topless barrel called a turret, Larry began to be nervous. The turret was made of plywood. It would stop wind and spray, but nothing else. He strained to hear what was going on in the cockpit and kept his eyes on the dark horizon and on the sky. Thunder rumbled far away, and there was a feel of rain in the air. The sky was clear and starry to the southwest, and as time passed a black and jagged bulk grew into it, shutting off the points of light. Guadaleanal! Lightning glowed on the horizon to the northwest; then what looked like lightning flashed fitfully at various points ashore, far away. Shellfire! Faint man-made thunder from inland on Guadaleanal competed with the nearing rumble of God from the sea.

Now half the stars were blotted out by rising peaks, and Larry could see the white beaches of the island not far ahead. Something black protruded from the water close to shore, and the waves washing over it left little trails of green light. Beyond it the shore was black and quiet.

"Domo Reef," Robb said quietly. "Come right, Walt. We'll patrol about a hundred yards from the beach."

The other PT, Prep Bernie, also came right and the two boats moved up the coast of Guadalcanal about a hundred yards apart. Larry had been ordered to watch ahead and to seaward, but he couldn't keep from glancing toward the beach frequently. It was so close! He knew that thousands of deadly enemies were there. Almost certainly narrowed, hateful eyes were watching the boat at this moment. What if they ran aground? What if the Japs suddenly opened up with machine guns? Cannon, maybe? But everything remained quiet except for the mutter of motors, the slap of waves, and the nearing rumble of thunder as clouds mounted higher into the sky to the northwest, the direction from which the "Tokyo Express" would come.

The two boats reached Aruligo—the former site of a small village—reversed course, and headed back toward Domo Reef. The shore loomed black. Larry's watch told him that it was after ten o'clock when the boats turned and started on the northwestward patrol along the coast again. The sky was wholly dark now, with thunder every few minutes, and all seemed poised, waiting.

The radio speaker rasped and an excited voice came through: "From Prep Stilly! Josephine in Kelly's Bar! Josephine in Kelly's Bar! Seven to nine. I'm making a run!"

Frozen silence, then Robb's voice whipped through it—"Full action stations! Torpedoman, stand by the tubes. Gun

safeties off. Don't fire unless I give the word, or unless we're illuminated by searchlight. In that case, fire at the light as soon as it finds us. Okay, gang, we're going in!"

Larry clicked off the safeties, braced his shoulders against the wall of the turret, and stared ahead. His insides were rising up into his throat and, swallow as he might, they would not go back down. He felt the bow rise beneath him, the muttering grow louder, with wake and bow wave brighter. The boat was moving as fast as it could with mufflers on. Larry could see nothing of the enemy ahead. The night seemed to grow thicker.

"Josephine in El Rancho! Josephine in El Rancho! Prep Jack."

El Rancho! The area just north of theirs! Then they were close, very close! Larry was shivering, his hands wet with sweat. A wave broke over the bow and spray brushed his face, its cool wetness welcome.

A mile ahead a searchlight flashed on! It swept the blackness like a gleaming finger of death. A spray of tracers, red and large, rose out of the night and the light went out. There was a hot red glare and the slam of guns. More explosions, and streams of tracer fire in all directions showed the battle. Nothing could be seen of the combatants except flashes of flame. Closer and closer the 107 came to the dark cloud from which death and fire were blazing. A series of bright flashes illuminated for a moment a lean, heaving vessel with spray at its bow. The thundering roar of PT motors was rising and falling; there seemed to be dozens of them.

The enemy column was coming closer and, lit by wreaths of tracer and the glow of gunfire, was heading right for the 107. The battle wasn't very loud yet, and Larry heard Robb

say sharply, "Come right! Hard right!" Larry heard the engines begin to climb in beat again as the throttles were shoved forward. The boat came to the right and began to move out of the path of the enemy. The 107 was trying to get into position for a bow shot with her torpedoes, so that the full length of the enemy ships would be the target, not just their extremely narrow bows.

Then the engines died!

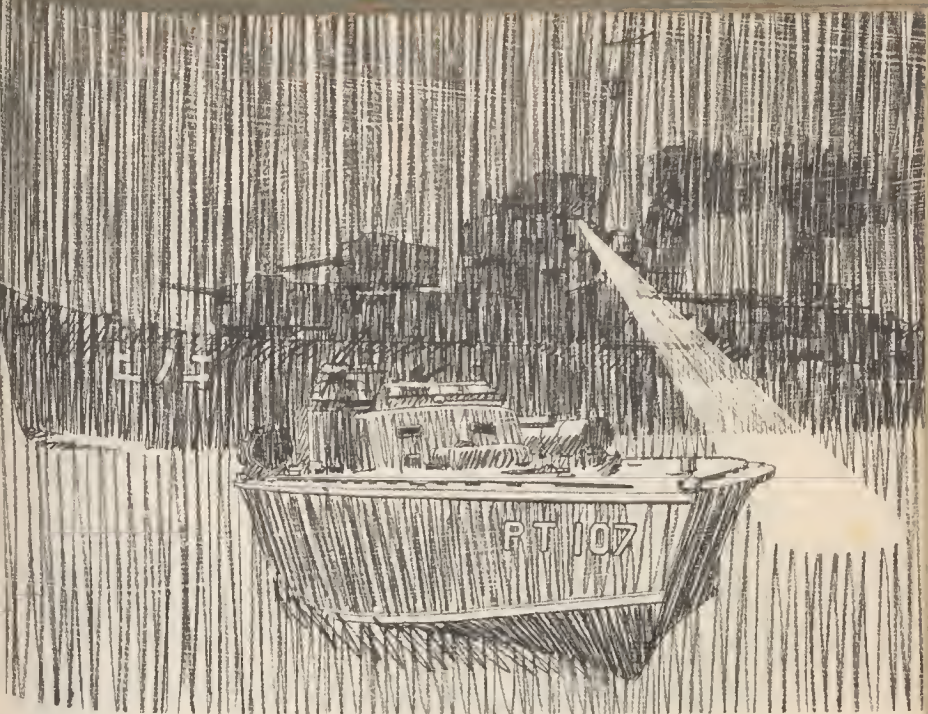
Larry nearly died, too; he almost cried out. In the horrible silence that dropped over the boat, he could hear men cursing softly, grunting as if hit. He heard footsteps go dashing down the wooden deck from cockpit to engine room hatch. The starters whined and died, whined and died. They were directly in the path of the battle, less than a mile away now. They were a sitting duck. In five minutes it would be over. The 107 would be blown from the water.

Oh, no! Larry cried to himself. Oh, God, no, God, please fix the engines! Please! He wanted to cry the words aloud, but he didn't. It was like one of those terrible nightmares in which you can move only slowly, or not at all, while some hideous unseen death comes closer and closer.

The starters whined and died, whined and died. Then, just as the situation seemed hopeless, the engines spluttered, coughed, and then roared to life, mufflers off.

"Thank God!" someone cried from the cockpit. The throttles moved forward, the roar grew to thunder, bow lifted, stern dug down, and the PT whirled off into the night and the sheltering darkness. Just then a searchlight came on and centered on the spot where the boat had been.

Larry felt like sitting down in the crowded turret, but instead he waited, fingers on the trigger bars, for the enemy searchlight to find them. But it went off, and suddenly the



fight seemed far away, marked still by flashes of gunfire, the cones of searchlights, and strings of tracer, red beads in the night.

Out of danger now, the skipper cut the 107's speed again and put the mufflers back on. Larry heard Lamar come running up to the cockpit.

"What is it, Lamar? What happened?" Robb asked.

"I think you tried to go ahead too fast under mufflers, skipper," said Lamar shakily. "Back pressure killed the engines, and that got so much gas in the carburetors that they flooded out. They're okay now!"

"Good," said Robb. "All right, boys! We're going back in!"

Oh, no! Larry's knees buckled. Not again, wasn't once enough? The engines, suppose the engines——

Silent again, the PT bored in toward the distant fight. But before it got there the beads of tracer dropped away, the

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gunfire began to die, and the disjointed fragments of talk on the radio jumbled together.

" . . . going away . . . making tracks. Stilly hit one . . . I got . . . Look out, Prep Bob! They're eoming at you. Over . . ."

"Prep Hugh, this is Prep Bernie. Come in . . . Over!"

"Prep Bernie, this is Prep Hugh. Go ahead."

"Prep Hugh, where are you, what happened? Christ, I thought you were gone!"

"Engines elunked out. Okay now. We're going baek in."

"Good boy! But I'm afraid it's too late. They've pulled out. They're already past Savo and reported making thirty-five knots. Over."

Larry heard Robb curse once in a low voiee. He knew that the skipper was humiliated by all this. Larry wasn't humiliated. He was still scared, but he did wish they had gotten off their torpedoes.

He wished it even more when Commander West came up on the radio a little later.

"All preps from Prep Westy. Boats that have fired all torpedoes return to Villa d'Amour. Baek to the barn. Others remain on stations for early morning inshore sweep to shoot up supplies that may have gotten in. Boats that have bakered and are going home, report."

Four boats headed for home. Larry envied them so much that he aehed all over. The thought of the dark, quiet tent under the royal palms was like heaven itself just then. He was still tense, but he began to relax a little as the minutes passed with no more sign of trouble. He heard the skipper laugh briefly and say, "Well, Walt, what did you say to yourself when the engines quit?"

"'Good night, nurse'—or something like that. 'Here's the end of Walt Stone!'"

"Me, too," said Robb.

At two-thirty the moon rose, and soon its silver light illuminated the battle-torn sea. Cactus Control reported that the condition was green—no enemy planes nearby—and Prep Westy, still on the scene, told the boats they could go on "watch and watch." Half of the crew could stretch out on deck near their stations and try to sleep a little. Larry could leave the cramped turret for a while, though one pair of machine guns would be manned and ready all the time.

Larry moved aft by the cockpit and leaned on its thin armor plate, which could turn only rifle bullets and shell splinters. He wanted to be near his friends. John Watanabe came forward from his station at the twenty-millimeter mount.

"Larry," he said in an exhausted voice.

"Well, John—that was something, huh?"

The two boys stood side by side, helmets in their hands, while the tropic breeze cooled their wet foreheads and began to dry their sweaty hair. The engines muttered. Silver flashed from the dark sea, and the ominous island, the island of death, slid by in darkness and in quiet.

The crew of the 107 changed places every hour. When dawn came Larry was asleep on the deck by his turret. His life jacket formed a pillow under his shoulders, and his steel helmet made an oddly comfortable support for his head. He awakened to a gentle shake.

"Larry." It was John Watanabe. "Wake up. We are going to battle stations for the inshore patrol."

Larry sat up. The first thing he noticed was the shore of

Guadalcanal some fifty or sixty feet away. The sight drove sleep from his eyes, and in two motions he was up and in the machine-gun turret.

"You needn't be that fast," said Robb with a smile. "We're just coming into enemy-held territory now."

"Oh." Larry grimed sheepishly.

"All right, boys," Robb said. "The Japs weren't here long enough last night to put landing boats ashore. Almost certainly, a few boats came out to them for men and supplies, but most of the things they carried were loaded into oil drums and lashed on deck. They threw them overboard for the tide to take in to the beach. Now we're supposed to find as many supplies as we can and shoot them up—particularly ammunition and fuel. So look sharp. Don't open fire without orders. Here we go. Edge in a little closer, Mac."

Larry watched the shore over the barrels of the two fifty-caliber machine guns. It looked peaceful, as the waves climbed up the beach in little crescents of white. The sweet island smell was strong, and birds were singing in flowering trees. Mountains towered high inland, their slopes covered with light green grass that looked soft and attractive but actually was the dreaded saw grass. Beyond the beach was a strip of luxuriant jungle spangled with flowers, tree ferns, and palms by the thousands. The beach wasn't clear. Every ten or fifteen feet there was a shattered and blackened landing boat or barge. There were hundreds of them. At intervals the pierced and red-rusted hulls of Jap transports lay beached, half in and half out of the water.

The boat moved slowly along, the bottom beneath her clearly visible through the clear water. Larry found himself staring down at it when he should have been watching the

shore. The thought of being stranded here, fifty feet from an enemy beach, gave him the shivers. Then beneath a palmetto he saw the outline of something covered by palm branches. The skipper was pointing at the pile.

"Shoot it up, Larry."

The guns bucked against their mounts, thurrrum, thurrrum, thurrrum, in bursts of five. Larry fed the tracer directly into the heap. It moved and leaped, suddenly blowing up with a crash, with flames shooting many feet into the air and a puff of black smoke rising above it. The PT moved on. Ahead, Larry saw other boats cruising the shore and heard the far-off riveting of twin fifties. A little farther along was a landing boat covered with palm branches. The twenty-millimeter aft spat forth its level line of fire, each shell a quarter-pound explosive missile. The landing boat lost its usefulness in a haze of explosions, and burst into flames as the fuel tank was ignited. Larry stared at the beach. Thick growth came close to the water here. It could conceal almost anything.

But the trees waved in the wind, and only an occasional bird moved. The coral bottom slid slowly by beneath.

"Keep a good lookout, boys," the skipper said. "One rifle bullet in our gas tanks could do for us."

The boat rounded a point. Larry saw something. "Aren't those ammunition cans under that brush?" he called.

"Right!" said Robb. "Open fire."

A dozen puffs of white smoke shot out of the jungle, and suddenly the air around Larry was full of strange, deathly noises. Something smacked into and through the turret. Another something ricocheted from a torpedo tube with a whine. Another glanced off the thin armor around the cockpit. Larry whipped his gun muzzles down until the

sights covered the area from which the rifle fire was coming. He pressed both triggers and kept them down. The after turret was firing, and the twenty as well. Tracers bounced from tree trunks, knocked off chunks of wood, cut down bushes, branches, whole small trees. Twenty-millimeter shells exploded in a steady rhythm with the vivid whiteness of flashbulbs.

"Get the ammo, Larry!" Robb shouted. Larry swung his fire toward the stack of cans. The heavy bullets—ball, explosive, tracer—smashed into it. The pile blew up with a noisy crash. The rifle fire continued, and the skipper hauled the boat around and got out of there at high speed. Larry sank back in a sweating, sick relief. He had been under fire. White splinters showed around the bullet hole in the turret. He was wholeheartedly glad the skipper had gotten the hell out. One spark, one hit in the tanks, and the boat would blow herself into toothpicks.

They sped over the waves toward home, the crew shouting and laughing now as if it had been the greatest joke in the world. Larry could not help but marvel at the courage shown by those thin, small men ashore, shielded only by flimsy brush, who had pitted their twenty-five-caliber rifles against the PT's much heavier armament and had driven her away. And he wondered, with a strange, raw, swelling sensation inside him, how many of them he had killed with his machine guns.

Larry felt a hundred years old when the boat pulled in against the dock at Sesapi and the skipper cut the engines. Silently, morosely, the crew waited with the other crews for the duty boat to take them to the tender for breakfast, and then to the village for sleep. The tent was already hot

inside, and Larry dropped onto his cot under the netting and lay in the dim, golden light from the canvas. At that point, he wanted nothing more than the completely unthinking, blessed refuge of sleep. Almost at once it came down over him, dark, purple, soothing, soft.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Torpedoes Away!

That afternoon, bathed in sweat, Larry awoke in what seemed like a canvas oven. He and John and Alex Lamb staggered up to the pool and fell into the cool water. Lying there, Larry felt the world come back into focus. Warm joy rushed over him. Tonight he would not have to go out onto the dark water and wait for the lean shapes, searchlights, guns, death. He would have the night ashore. He would go to bed at nine or ten o'clock, sleep all night. Then tomorrow . . . but he couldn't think about tomorrow with its night. This night the "Professionals"—the other half of the PT force—would be going out, not the "Varsity."

Larry didn't get to sleep all night, however. He and John were tapped for sentry duty out in the jungle, where a ring of alert men surrounded the village every night. An attack wasn't likely, but the possibility had to be kept in mind. Larry found that he would have a two-hour sentry duty about every sixth day.

The Tokyo Express ran on Larry's next patrol night, but it only dipped in and out quickly above Cape Esperance. Except for a quick brush with the northernmost PT patrol,

there was no encounter. Two nights later, the enemy tried to reinforce the island with barges running down from the Russells. Six PTs found them, and Larry had indelibly etched in his memory the sight of a burning, heeling, loaded barge going down under the steady smashing of the 107's guns, including his own. Tracers were everywhere; barges were running by, barges sinking; the roar of engines was deafening as the PTs dashed about wreaking all the damage possible.

When the 107 returned to the base that morning, Larry didn't even want breakfast. He went directly to the village and tried to hide all memory of the fight in sleep.

"Hey, kid," Tubby Peet said lazily. "That Jap friend of yours, that Whatanobby, is going island-happy. He took over my sentry duty this afternoon. He took Hank's two days ago."

"Huh?" Larry said, snapping fully awake and feeling worried. John had already asked if Larry would mind swapping places with him on their next day's sentry duty. Larry had been due to take the post by the main creek, some two hundred yards from camp, and John had offered him the swimming pool post instead.

"Yeah," said Peet, looking puzzled. "I had the post farthest out in the jungle, down by the main creek. He says he likes being by himself." Peet shrugged. "Damned Jap is nuts. I still don't trust him."

"Ah, go soak your head," said Larry. But he felt vaguely uneasy.

This was the time of dark, moonless nights. Japanese bombers came over at night, and Larry spent many an hour in the creek bed or in a slit trench. There was heavy fighting ashore at Guadalcanal. The Commander returned from head-

quarters, still somehow crisp, brown-faced, grim-looking. He went out with a different boat of his squadron every other night. Larry, who always felt uneasy around the Commander, hoped he would miss the 107 for a while.

Suddenly, after days of struggling for survival in the waters around the tiny island of Guadalcanal, Larry discovered that there was another world, another war. On November 7 he went down to Sesapi for a morning of work to find the base crew in a strange tumult.

"We've landed at North Africa," Lane Peters told him excitedly. For a moment, Larry wondered where Africa was. Then things came into focus.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Yep. Big fleet, fifty thousand men. Admiral Kent Hewitt in command. You don't see what this means, Larry? This war may end yet, someday."

That interested Larry tremendously, but he was quite sure it wouldn't end before the coming night. And that was what had him scared. A full patrol was going out. One of the boats would be the 107, and the Tokyo Express was sure to come. It would be a dark night.

The day was sultry. All days were hot, of course, but this one made the men feel as if they were inside an oven. It rained several times during the morning, while the 107's crew was working over the boat or at the base. The noon meal was tasteless in the heat, and there was no breeze blowing over the bay when the exhausted men rode the Higgins boat back to the village. Dark clouds marched in the sky, bright sunshine alternating with periods of shadow that were no less hot.

"A rough night out there tonight," Mac Gordon said gloomily. "I hope the skipper can draw a high card, if

nothing is coming down." He was referring to the fact that on nights when no enemy was reported, only half the duty section of boats went out. The others remained alongside the dock ready for an emergency call. The boat captains drew cards up in the radio shack; those who got the lowest cards went out. So far Lieutenant Robb had drawn nothing but twos and threes.

"I wouldn't worry, Mac," Mike Michaels said slowly, his face turned up to the sky. "We'll all be going out."

Peet snorted, but Larry also felt the foreboding of a bad night to come. A hard breeze started to blow as the Higgins boat pulled into the dock at the village, a dock made of steel plates called Marston matting supported by concrete-filled oil drums. The wind made a strange, sad rustling in the palm fronds overhead and small whitecaps sprang up quickly in the stream. The tent was flapping as the crew entered it. They had barely made it inside when the rain began. But it didn't cool things off. The tent felt like a steam room as the men settled on their cots to rest before the evening patrol.

The rain had stopped by dinner time, but the sky was not wholly clear as the patrol crews moved down the creek afterward in the duty PT. John and Larry stood side by side on the dock, each taking comfort from the other's nearness. Sunset was turning the entire sky into a pattern of red and black.

Once at Sesapi, Larry and the rest of the crew went at once to the 107, getting aboard her just as the rain started again. It already was developing into a nasty night. The red faded away, to be replaced by inky black. Rain pattered on the boat decks, then roared, and flashes of lightning showed palm trees bending in the wind.

Larry and John left the crowded chart house and went below to the crew's quarters, which were cheerless now that they were no longer lived in. In a little while the rain died to a patter on the wooden decks above them, and soon they felt the boat heel as someone came aboard. The skipper was back. They went topside at once.

"No dope yet, boys," the skipper said. "But the admiral says to be on the lookout and have an attack group out. Bad weather has kept air patrol and the coast watchers from making contact with anything, but they're expecting trouble. We have the patrol area from Savo to Esperance—the hottest one of all. Prep Nick will be with us. That's the highest scorer in the squadron, and we want to beat them tonight, if we can. Wind 'em up, Lamar."

By the time the boat got outside the harbor, Larry was wet. The usually calm waters of Sleepless Lagoon had built up into short, nasty waves, and the boats bounded and smashed their way along in the darkness. The trip from Tulagi to Savo took longer than usual, and Larry huddled down in his turret, dodging the spray that occasionally blew across the opening. The boat was to the lee of Savo for a while, and the waves were smaller. Only in lightning flashes could Larry make out Savo and the looming heights of Guadalcanal.

The 107 and Prep Nick began their patrol. The hours crawled slowly by. Larry was glad he was in the forward turret. It was close enough to the cockpit so that he could lean back and hear what was going on, even take part in the conversation if things weren't too busy there. Mac Gordon was telling about quail shooting in North Carolina when the radio speaker cleared its throat. All talked ceased instantly, and Bill Russell leaped to turn up the volume.

"All preps from Villa d'Amour. Urgent message. Code. Stand by."

Mac Gordon ducked down, seized the code pad, and wedged himself in the chart house entrance with a blue flashlight directed on the pad. Words came one at a time over the radio. The quartermaster looked up the meanings and read them off, his voice somber.

"Seven enemy vessels." A sea broke over the bow and he ducked below. The wind howled. "One cruiser." A vivid flash of lightning sheeted the world. "Six destroyers." No one spoke. "Course 125." Walter Stone, the exec, coughed. "Speed twenty-five. Distance twenty-five."

"Twenty-five!" exclaimed the skipper in a shocked voice. "That sighting must have been sent in an hour ago for us to have it now. They're probably here right now! We can't let 'em slip through without sighting. Westy and Charlie will be trapped against the beach. Keep a sharp lookout, all hands!"

The whole crew, except the engineers, was on deck, searching the black, tumultuous sea. Discomfort was forgotten. The column of enemy vessels might come from any direction. They were there somewhere. A dozen times Larry thought he saw the stealing, dark shapes, but always they resolved themselves into waves. Nothing happened. The patrol went on. Each minute seemed like a year.

The radio shouted, "Josephine in Kelly's Bar. They're right on top of us! A string of them."

Robb cursed fiercely, swung the bow left, and opened the throttle. The torpedo tubes were already trained out, and Mike was standing by them, firing mallet in hand, in case the electrical firing circuits failed.

Westy's voice came back on, strong and calm.

"Deploy to the right. Attack, and make 'em good!"

A choking silence fell over the cockpit. The visibility was nearly zero, and the Japs must have been right on top of Prep Westy and Prep Charlie. Westy's voice came on again.

"Good going, Charlie, I think you made a hit. Swing right, now, and we'll cut right through them and—" A crash filled the speaker. A scrap of an announcement was heard . . . "hit . . ." and then silence.

Charlie's voice filled the speaker. "They got Westy, they got Westy! He's down off Esperance. Send over—" His message ceased as though cut by a knife. Over toward Esperance the sky was red with tracer and the fearsome light of burning ships. Then the rain squall closed in on the 107 again.

With dramatic suddenness the curtain of rain and squall lifted. Larry could see the burning vessel ahead quite clearly now, and his stomach shifted in his body when he realized that it was a PT boat. Up the beach another fire burned, but it was moving off to the northwest.

"All preps!" said the radio. "This batch has pulled out, I think, but look close. Thought we saw more ships coming around north of Savo. Look alive!"

"Hmm," the skipper said grimly. "The express must have run in two sections tonight. Come around and head back for Savo, Walt. We'll resume patrol."

"How about Prep Westy and Charlie?" Stone asked.

"While enemy are in the area orders are not to hunt for survivors. If other ships are coming in, we might lose two or three more boats pinned in against the beach. And it's damned hard to find a swimming man at night. We'll get them as soon as it's daylight."

Now Savo loomed ahead, with the white of rollers on the beach plainly visible. The series of squalls had blown away, stars were beginning to appear in the sky, and the waves were dying down rapidly.

"Come about, Mac," the skipper said. The quartermaster swung the wheel, and the 107 steadied on the reverse course.

Then Larry saw movement in the sky, and the blue flicker of exhaust flames.

"Plane on starboard bow!" he cried. "Coming this way!"

The dim shape dropped from a cloud and headed for the boat in a shallow dive, with the whine of propeller and engine rising in the night. The boat swung hard left.

"Track the plane. Fire if he does!" came the skipper's order.

The plane passed over quickly, zoomed up into the sky, and disappeared. Robb said, "He spotted us for sure. He'll be back, so keep those safeties off."

The skipper picked up the radio microphone and spoke into it.

"Caetus Control from Prep Hugh. Are there friendly planes in the air? Urgent. Over."

Seconds seemed like hours, until the radio spoke through static: "All preps from Caetus Control. There are no, repeat, no friendly planes in the air."

Robb whistled. Larry sighed; he couldn't help it. What a fine thing it would be to have a sky full of American planes overhead. He stared ahead of the boat, straining his eyes. Time passed. Then something darker seemed to project above the horizon. Larry, remembering what he had learned, looked at a point just above the area, peering down

from the corner of his eyes at the horizon. Sure enough, a number of dark shapes were moving silently and swiftly over the water.

"Sir, sir!" he said in a choked voice. "I see them, six or seven of them. Just on the starboard bow!"

Frozen silence from the cockpit, while the skipper pointed his seven-fifty binoculars ahead and to the right.

"I see them. Good boy, Larry. Looks like a cruiser and some tin cans. Russell, give the contact. Walt, you take the wheel and swing right. Push her up a few knots. Mike—stand by the fish. Guns track, be ready for searchlights, but don't shoot at anything else. Anything! Unless I give the order!"

The cold lump in Larry's stomach grew to basketball size as he swung his guns and waited, hearing Bill Russell's excited voice say again and again into the mike: "All preps. Josephine in Kelly's Bar, Josephine in Kelly's Bar. Course one twenty-five. Speed twenty-five. Prep Hugh. Out."

Something screamed in the air, followed by a crash. A column of water arose fifty yards to one side of the boat. A plane pulled up in a steep climb with its engine howling.

"Don't fire, don't fire!" Robb ordered. "He's gonna strafe, but don't fire at him!"

The skipper's voice was steady and penetrating, and Larry moved his fingers away from the trigger bars. The plane whipped over and dove down. Red tracers broke from its wings. Larry shrunk under his helmet, heart fluttering, and gripped the side of the turret with both hands to keep from shooting. The tracers seemed to float in the air for a long, long time, moving slowly, slowly, like a string of red baseballs. Then they passed astern. The boat remained dark and silent, and perhaps the pilot of the plane thought he had

made a mistake. He vanished and didn't return.

Larry forced his gaze ahead again. The enemy ships could be plainly seen without glasses now. The angle was closing fast. Larry looked to starboard. The other PT was there, a hundred yards away, moving steadily and silently.

"Range nine hundred yards," Robb's voice came. "Our speed twelve knots. Got it set, Walt?"

"Yes!" came Stone's voice, breathless.

Mac Gordon now had the wheel. "Wait—come right a hair, Mac—okay, now we're on."

Larry heard the click of the keys in the torpedo firing circuits. The skipper called: "Fire three! Fire four!"

After a long instant, the boat lurched and the slim torpedoes slid from the right and left after tubes, splashed into the water, and darted away, leaving a track of light in the dark ocean. The boat moved back precisely on course.

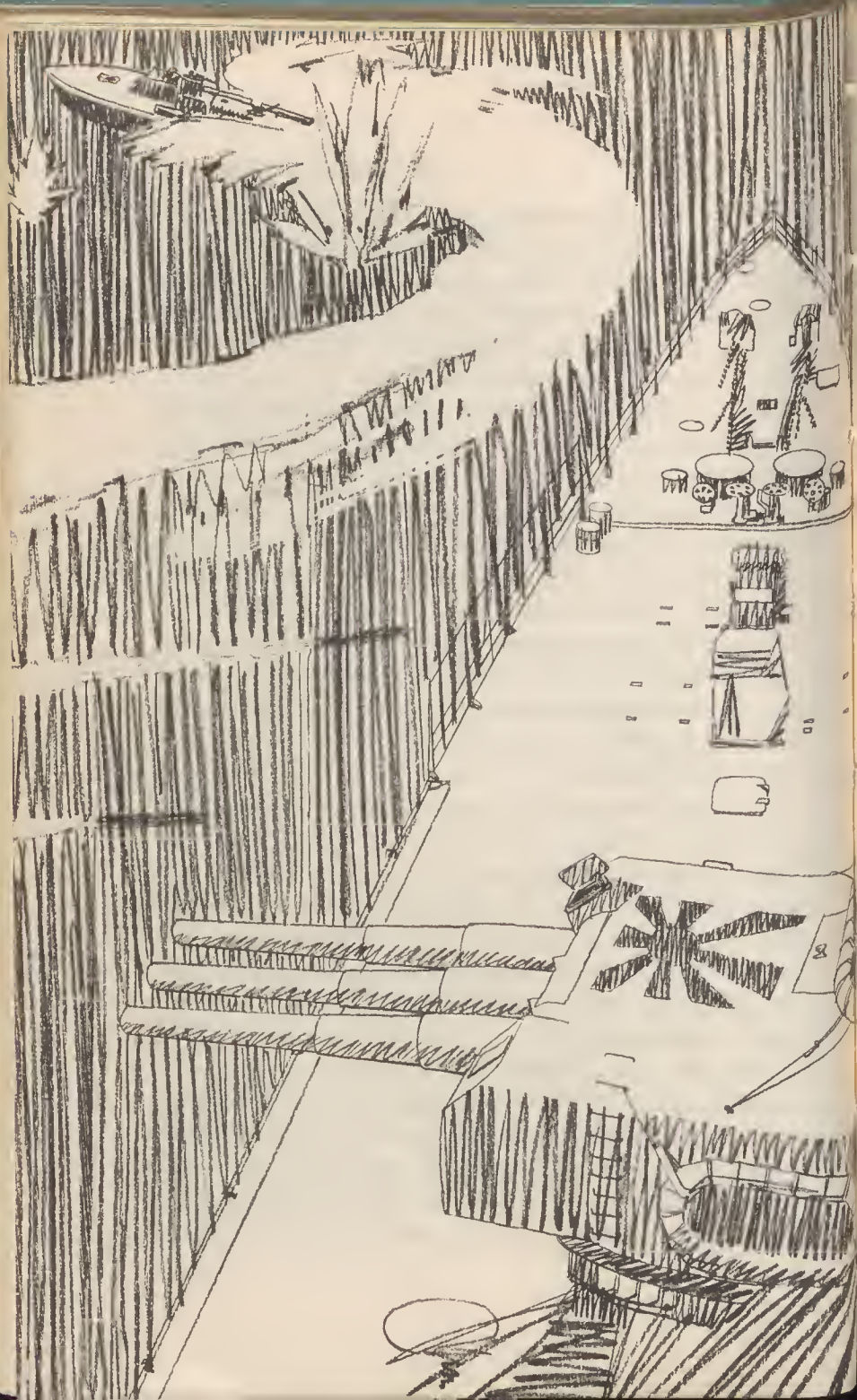
"Fire one! Fire two!"

The other two torpedoes splashed into the water, and the boat rocked.

"Hard right, Mac! Take her on around and let's get out of here. Quiet, everybody. Don't shoot, don't do anything!"

From the corner of his eye Larry had seen the splash of launched torpedoes over on Prep Nick. Now, as the 107 swung right, the other boat did the same thing. Eight torpedoes were on their way to the enemy column. Seconds ticked by. Larry couldn't breathe. Surely—

Forward and aft on the leading Jap vessel, two masses of flame burst forth. Then an express train seemed to rumble and hurtle by in the air overhead. Two spouts of water sprang up fleetingly between the two boats. Simultaneously the second ship in the column exploded with a roar, settling



back into the water with flame pouring from her decks.

The skipper leaned on the 107's throttles, the mufflers came off, and the boat roared and leaped swiftly ahead. Relieved of twelve thousand pounds of torpedoes, she tore through the water like a flying fish. Prep Nick was making knots, too. Slightly faster, she drew ahead of the 107.

Now, all along the line of the enemy, guns thundered and tracers split the night of Iron-Bottomed Bay. Spouts rose ahead of and behind the two fleeing PTs. The 107 zigzagged rapidly, making for the southern end of Savo. Just let us get around that, Larry prayed to himself. Around there and we're safe. Just a few hundred yards more and they would bank around the steep headland and be out of the line of this blistering fire.

Mac Gordon's voice rose in a startled shout: "Look! Look! Just off the point! Come about, quick!"

Guns crashed from the center of a darker shadow near the end of the dark island. The Japs had sent a sleeper around Savo. A shell burst twenty feet from the bow, showering Larry and the cockpit with water as the 107 banked and turned like a fighter plane. A searchlight blazed on, and the 107 was pinned in a cone of intense light that seemed to have almost a physical force. Larry felt naked and exposed.

The searchlight was high above the sea, so he could shoot at it and still miss the 107's cockpit. He turned his guns into the blinding spot of light and pressed the triggers. He moved the stream of tracers into the source of light. The other pair of fifties were also thrumming away. The twenty aft was spitting out its regular, spaced explosions, and Larry could see the white flashes of its shells exploding on the enemy ship.

The destroyer's bow guns roared again, and the shells made splashes dead ahead of the boat, fifty feet away. The destroyer was so close to the PT that she couldn't depress her big guns far enough to hit the fleeting boat. Tracers looped and swirled around the searchlight, whammed and glanced from metal. The light went out.

"Good boys!" yelled Robb. "Make smoke!" His forty-five cracked twice. Mike was ready, and immediately a cloud of white smoke whipped back from the stern. It billowed up high, hiding the PT from the direct view of the closely pursuing destroyer, and the enemy machine gun fire stopped.

"Depth charges!" shouted Robb.

Mike and the radioman went into action. The first two of the four-hundred-pound depth charges were rolled over the side. Larry, watching astern, saw a tremendous column of water rise into the air not far from the destroyer's bow. Then the second charge exploded. The PT leaped and flinched at the impact.

Larry wondered what it had done to the destroyer. She dropped back. But across two miles of bay the rest of the enemy ships doubled their fire, for the PT was now silhouetted against the island, dragging after it a rising funnel of white smoke. The PT hurtled north, close against Savo, the wall of jungle hurling back the roar of her engines and the crack of gunfire. Shell spouts were everywhere.

With heart-stopping impact, one shell exploded aft, close to the PT's port side, not hitting, but close, really close! The boat sheered sideways, then kept going. There was a smell of hot sulfur in the air, and the bright dazzle of the explosion half blinded Larry. Shells roared over and smacked the beach. The island seemed to go on forever, and the 107 was a running target for twenty guns.

"Almost there!" shouted Robb. "Hang on, boys!"

The pursuing destroyer had dropped back, but the more distant enemy was shooting fast. Smoke lay between the PT and the closest enemy, saving the small, paper-thin vessel from sure destruction. Larry could see the end of the island now, flashing toward them, beach tearing past, the flickering and flaming of the enemy guns, white shell spouts. He heard the roar, felt the fear. Would they ever make it? Would they——

The 107 roared around the north point of Savo about fifty feet from the beach, skidding around the turn. Black walls suddenly cut off the savage scene of burning ships, firing guns, whirling tracers, and spotlights.

Larry's knees buckled and he hung on to the side of the turret, listening gratefully to the loud, excited, and fearful talk in the cockpit. He had been praying so hard, afraid so much, but they had made it!

"Drop 'em down again," Robb said, as soon as it was evident that the enemy destroyer wasn't going to chase them around Savo. The engines' roar dropped to a rumble and then to a mutter. The mufflers came on again. Larry was wringing wet, but he wasn't cold—except in his stomach, and that lump was warming up now.

"We don't have to go in again, do we, skipper?" Roger Long called forward. "Didn't we get off all four fish?"

"Yep," said Robb with a great sigh. "But we've got survivors to search for at dawn."

As the boat moved south again, close to the quiet side of Savo, Lamar came bustling forward.

"Skipper!" he said. "Do you know who saved this boat?"

"The good Lord, I believe," Robb said, laughing shakily.

"It was mighty close!"

"Closer than you know," Lamb said. "We got a hole as big as your head in the port side of the engine room. That close shell blasted it open."

"My God!" exclaimed Robb.

"Right at the waterline, too! A piece of plank hit me on the helmet and knocked me cold."

"Are we taking much water?" the skipper demanded in alarm.

"No, sir. Tubby Peet saved this boat, skipper. He had sense enough, when I was out, to peel off his life jacket and stuff it into the hole. I reckon at the speed we were making, water was coming in like from a fire hose. He jammed that jacket in there and then he sat on it. If he hadn't, we'd a filled up in two minutes, the engines would have gone, and them Japs would have had us for supper."

"For God's sake!" said Robb. "Tubby Peet! Good for him! Tell him he can have anything he wants from now on. Can we stay out, Lamar?"

"Yes, if you don't run over about fifteen knots. We can't go in, skipper, not with those boys out there in that water! We got to help hunt for 'em."

"Right," said Robb.

When the 107 rounded the southern end of Savo, the battle was over. Some gunfire could still be heard, but it was far to the northwest, where the two boats on the Kamimbo patrol were trying their luck with the retreating enemy.

Silence fell over Iron-Bottomed Bay. The 107 commenced her long search, crisscrossing the water, heading all the while toward where the two PTs had been hit. Larry felt sick now. He wondered how he would feel if he were in that

black water, with the great depths beneath him filled with dead men and sharks all around.

"All preps!" said the radio. Breathing stopped. "We've picked up Westy and Charlie and most of their crews."

A shout arose in the 107's cockpit. Men hugged each other and Larry felt a tremendous joy and relief. The voice continued:

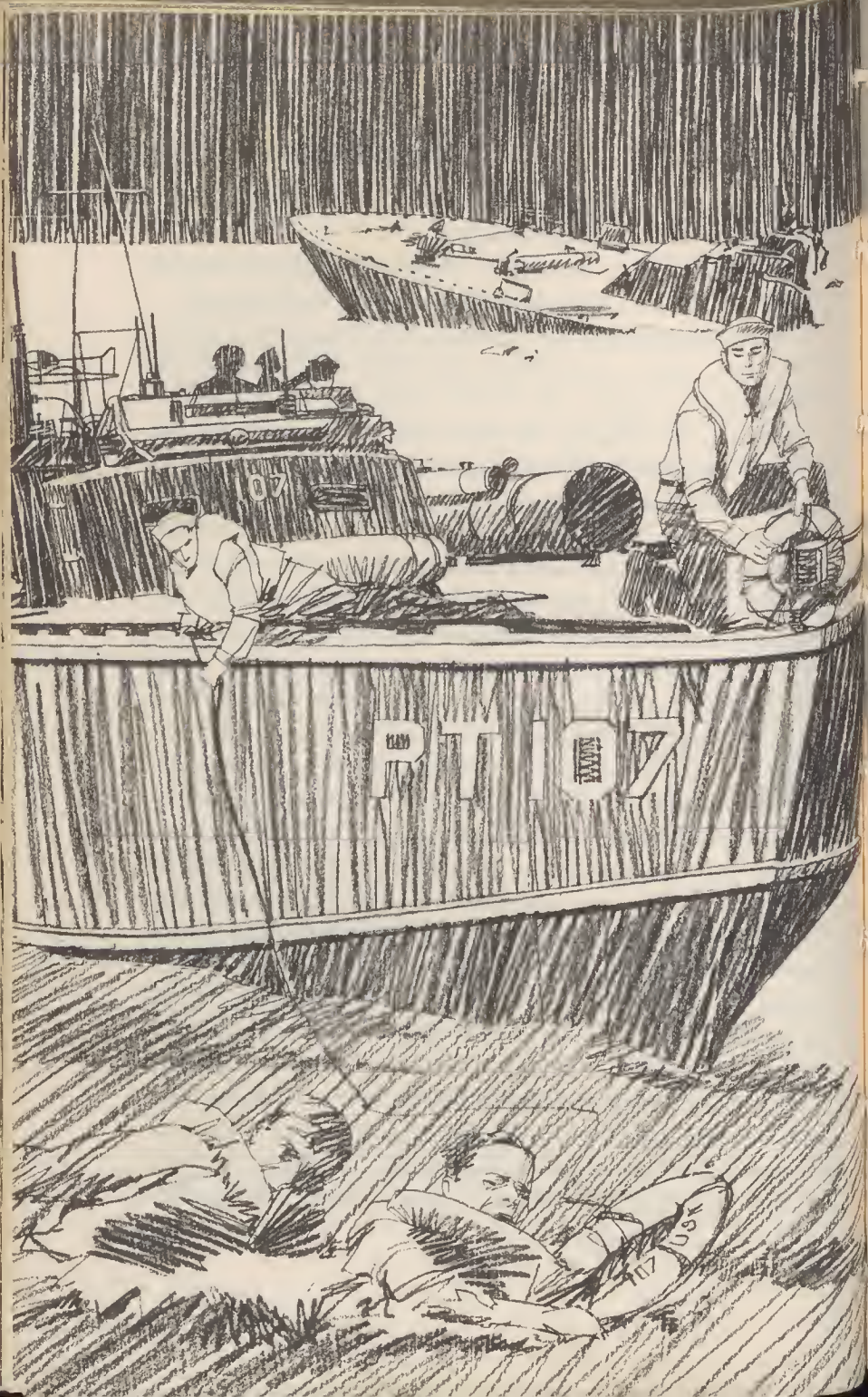
"Six men are missing. All boats will stay in the area and search until everybody's accounted for."

It was an unnecessary order. One reason morale was high in the PTs was that every man knew that if he was in the water, trying to fight off fear and sharks, his shipmates would not give up the search until they found him. No one ever wanted to quit. Each could imagine himself in the place of a wounded, desperate man in the water.

The searching boats covered every foot of the area thoroughly. Toward dawn, Larry thought he saw a splash in the water off to starboard, and then he heard a distant shot.

"Man in the water to starboard!" he shouted, unaccountably feeling tears come to his eyes. "Let's go, skipper!"

The boat hurtled in the direction of the shot. Others guided it, and in two minutes the boat idled beside the swimmer. Half the crew hurried to the port bow and gently hauled him aboard. He was exhausted and naked, except for his belt with forty-five and shark knife. Swimming for hours, he had covered half the distance from the beach at Esperance, where his boat had gone down, to Savo. The man preferred drowning or being eaten by sharks to being captured by the Japanese on Guadalcanal. Now, in spite of his protest that he wanted to stay topside and help look for others, the rescued man was hustled below and put to



bed in the skipper's bunk, wrapped in blankets and with three cups of hot coffee inside him.

He was the last man rescued. Three had been killed. Their shark- and explosive-torn bodies were finally recovered, one by the 107. Two others were missing.

The sun rose above the bay as three PTs hovered off Cape Esperance, where the blackened hull of the 112 lay half out of the water. The other boats were scattered around the battle area, busily destroying several loaded landing boats filled with food and ammunition.

One of the two New Zealand corvettes in the area came into sight. Since before dawn, the PTs had been hovering close to the wrecked boat to insure that no Jap got aboard her. Now the corvette's forward gun boomed. A spout of water and sand rose from the water's edge. Another shot crashed into the fringe of palms. A third landed squarely on the boat. She blew up, her gas tanks exploding with a great white flash.

On a stripped palm trunk above the radio shack at Sesapi, the American flag waved gently in the breeze. The flag was at half-mast as the leading PT touched the dock. The crew moved quickly to make her fast. The members of the base force stood about in silent groups with somber faces. Three crumpled figures, so recently moving, breathing friends of these men, were carried tenderly ashore. No one spoke. The shadow of the flag touched the dock as the dead were carried across it. The little ripples murmured on the beach.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Night Action

Larry slept that day as if dead, and through much of the night as well. Twice he awoke in a sweat from a nightmare in which he saw again the dead man his boat had picked up. One of the man's legs had been missing from the knee down, the other from the hip, and the shredded flesh showed plainly the mark of shark's teeth.

"Don't let it get you down, Larry," Mac Gordon had said quietly. "He was most likely dead when he hit the water, and he didn't feel any of that. You want to quit thinking about it, or you'll lose your nerve."

Sleep helped greatly, as did the news that, while the PT 107 was being repaired, the crew would have a few days' relief from patrols. Possibly the thing that revived Larry's numbed faculties most was the sight of Tubby Peet playing the part of hero.

Actually, Peet was quieter than before. The white hat, now painted blue, still rested at a cocky angle on his nose. He had started chewing something that looked like tobacco—at any rate, his spit was brown—and he looked at John Watanabe and Larry like an infinitely wise old dog watch-

ing a pair of gamboling puppies. Also, he took to gazing soulfully into the sky, particularly when the two boys were watching, then giving an impressive shake of his head and walking away with great dignity.

This aloofness soon faded, however, and Larry and John found themselves the subject of numerous orders from Peet. They were told how to do their work, how to clean guns, how to wear their tattered clothes. Above all, they were instructed on the manner in which to deport themselves on patrol against the enemy in order to win some measure of the distinction that George Peet, Motor Machinist's Mate 3/e, had achieved.

When the naval commander at Tulagi pinned a Bronze Star on Tubby's shirt front one day, Larry held his breath, fearing the captain might make a mistake with the pin and puncture Tubby. He imagined an explosive pop or a long hiss, with Tubby flying crazily around the grassy area, growing smaller minute by minute. The fantasy pleased Larry, and he almost laughed aloud while standing at attention as Peet received his medal. After the ceremony, Tubby was even more obnoxious.

While the 107 was in dry dock, Larry made another friend. He had been feeling lonely because John Watanabe seemed to be on sentry duty so often, or taking solitary walks in the jungle, where he seemed strangely unwilling to have company. Larry knew how seriously the fact that they were fighting Japanese was preying on the quiet young Japanese-American. John's behavior almost caused a fight between Larry and Peet.

"That Whatanobby is carrying messages to the Japs," Peet announced one day. "They come in when he's on sentry duty, or out walking, and they pay him money. Or maybe

because he's a slant-eyed Jap he don't even want money. You watch. I'll betcha he's planning on turning us all over to them some dark night. I never did trust him."

"You're full of——beans!" Larry rapped out. "You make life so miserable for him around here it's no wonder he wants to get away."

But, with Watanabe somehow living apart, Larry was lonely. Luckily Bori came along in time to fill the gap, at least partially.

One day Larry was sitting in the tent playing "Paper Doll" on his windup phonograph when someone scratched at the canvas beside the tent doorway.

"Come in," Larry said.

The doorway was filled for a moment by two natives coming into the tent. In the lead was Savo Bill, the local chief. His age was somewhere between forty and eighty. His hair was grizzled and his face wrinkled, but he stood straight, with clear eyes and a smooth, strong, coal black body. He wore a red loincloth and had a very short pipe thrust between his teeth. Draped over his shoulder was a length of jungle vine with a dozen ripe pineapples entwined in it. He carried a dozen wild limes in a basket made of a single leaf.

"Good morning, chief," Larry said, standing up. "How are you?"

"Belly belong along me not walk about. Bring plenty fella fruit."

He hung the fruit from the tent pole and sat down on a box. Just behind him a much younger native stood impassively. The record had ended just before they came in, and Larry put the playing arm back in its cradle. Savo Bill's pipe was obviously cold, so Larry reached over to Roger's

bunk and got his tobacco pouch. He passed it to Savo Bill, who grunted, filled his pipe, and lit up with the match Larry passed him. Larry said:

"Thank you for the fruit, chief. You plenty good fella to Americans."

When he tried to talk the *bêche-de-mer* pidgin English that was the common language in the Solomons, Larry always had a feeling of unreality. He had read about pidgin in Jack London's *South Sea Tales*, but he was still amazed by the fact that this really was the way natives and white men talked to each other in the Solomon Islands.

The chief was pleased. He rose to his full height and beat his chest. "Me American. Me marine." He held his right hand far above his head as though measuring a height above the ground. "American, like you."

He leaned over and put his hand down by his knees. "British," he said scornfully. He then spat a scarlet stream onto the ground and rubbed it into the mud with his horny foot.

"Jap," he said. He spat again and sat down with dignity.

Larry laughed. "I'll have to celebrate that with a little music." He started to wind up the phonograph. The young man behind the chief came forward instantly and leaned over until his face was close to the phonograph. He too wore a red loincloth. His shiny black features had a pleasant expression, in spite of his filed teeth. He gave an impression of eager, ready friendliness.

"Pickaninny belong along me," Savo Bill said, indicating that the younger native was his son. "Him fella Bori."

"Hi, Bori," said Larry while reaching out a hand. Bori studied his hand for a moment, looked at Larry, and

gingerly reached out his own hand. They touched for a moment, and then Bori shyly snatched his hand away. Savo Bill beamed.

"Fella music bokkis?" Savo Bill asked, pointing with his chin at the phonograph. Larry nodded. The chief nodded again, stood up, and walked out of the tent.

Bori stayed put. Larry started the record playing. Bori dropped his pipe from his mouth but didn't notice it, leaned over, and with an open mouth followed the song. His eyes started going around and around, following the record. Larry didn't laugh—to him there was something pathetic in the young man's astonishment. When the record ended Bori sat up with a smile of deep and happy pleasure all over his face.

"Fella music bokkis again?" he said shyly.

Larry played "Paper Doll" once more, and then others of his record collection, including Henry James and "Sleepy Lagoon," the height of irony for a PT man. Bori liked them all.

"You like sell fella music bokkis?" he asked.

"No," Larry said. "Bring good luck."

"My word," said Bori sadly. He looked at Larry sharply, the trading blood warming up within him.

"I give one fella canoe for music bokkis."

Larry shook his head. Bori appeared to be thinking things over. Then, with an air of having settled the whole thing and making the transaction certain, he said with dignity: "I give one fella canoe, and two fella wives. Good wives. Young. They work hard."

Larry felt his cheeks grow hot, and his face twitched with the desire to laugh. But he knew that to laugh at this offer

would deeply offend the young man. So Larry looked very sad.

"Taboo," he said, very sadly. "Fella Mary taboo along me."

Bori threw up his hands in a hopeless gesture, looked at Larry with deep sympathy and compassion, and shook his head. Then he changed the subject. Obviously he thought that a man who couldn't even approach a girl need cheer-ing up.

"Washee shirt," Bori said. "Washeee trousers. A nickel." He worked his lips over the unaccustomed word, "Okay?"

"Okay," Larry said at once. A nickel was the standard price for washing any garment. A stalwart native man would do the bargaining and take the nickel. His wife, or one of his wives, would do the washing. Larry gave Bori several dunga-ree shirts, trousers, and some underwear. Larry stuck out his hand again. Bori looked at it, looked at Larry's face, and smiled.

They shook hands. "We're friends," Larry said, meaning it. Again the dark eyes on his, puzzled, searching. "Brother," said Larry. "You and me blood brother."

Bori smiled again and nodded vigorously. "Friends," he said with relish. "Friends."

The night of November 8, the "Varsity" managed to put a torpedo into a Japanese destroyer off Esperance. Still burning, she was towed out of the area by her sister ships. Two PTs were hit. The 97 received a Jap shell through her bow—no one injured except by splinters, but the bow was so badly wrecked that only high speed kept it out of the water and dry enough to get the boat home. The 103 ran too close to Savo and hit a reef. She was towed off the next morning, but both boats needed substantial repair.

The 107 was hauled off while her paint was still wet, and on the tenth she went on patrol again. The boats found nothing but barges and aircraft that night. She missed the barges, but found herself running in circles off Domo Reef firing everything she had at a flight of float Zeros that were trying to blow her out of the water. The battle ended in a draw, but Larry decided then and there he didn't want any more air attacks.

Bori woke him the next morning, late. The young native had brought him ripe pineapples and mangoes for breakfast.

He grinned happily as Larry literally dove into the fruit. Juice drenched him to the ears, and he felt momentarily sorry for all the people at home who would never know what a trec-ripened mango or a bush-ripened pineapple tasted like.

"Man, I wish I had me a pet native," Roger Long said. "How do you do it, Larry?"

"Personality—and then I'm not so horny old as some people I know," Larry said with a grin. Then he distributed the rest of the fruit among his friends.

After breakfast, he and Bori went for a ride up the creek in Bori's dugout, outrigger canoe. It was a fast, narrow little craft, and Bori now kept it moored against the pier at the village, so that Larry never lacked taxi service. The two young men were beginning to feel a genuine liking for each other, and their friendship made a black time somewhat lighter for Larry.

On November 12, the 107 was due to go out again. All day Sleepless Lagoon had boiled with activity. Many American destroyers, cruisers, and transports milled about in the sheltered waters, the transports settling down early to unloading troops and supplies. Night came down, and with it

the stiff stomach, the scarcely drawn breaths, the faint but growing sickness of fear. Then the word came.

No PTs, repeat, no PTs were to go out. The American destroyers and cruisers were staying over for the night. They would take on the Tokyo Express while the transports headed for Nouméa. The word spread among the PT men.

"The Japs have got battleships coming down tonight!" announced one sailor. "Man, ain't I glad I won't be out there. The admiral says he don't want no PTs getting in the way. Well, Mac, I'm glad to oblige him on that one!"

There was hearty agreement among the PT crews.

After dark, the PT men climbed the heights of the high hill behind their base. The view was superb when they reached the top. To the southwest Larry and John Watanabe could see much of the long length of Guadalcanal, lit here and there by tiny flashes of light from shellfire. They saw silent, dark Savo, rising like a spine from the sea. A few stars were out. Occasionally, by straining his eyes, Larry could make out the shapes of American ships stealing through the darkness. He knew there were five cruisers and ten or eleven destroyers out there, and he shivered, knowing what it was like on those haunted waters. It was immensely reassuring to have the heavy ships ready for what might come.

He put his arm around John Watanabe's shoulder, feeling how thin his friend had become, how the bones stuck out through the hard muscles.

"What are you thinking, John?" he asked. "I haven't seen much of you lately."

"No. I am alone much. You see, I fight for America. I must. And all the while I see the men of my blood fighting bravely and dying, too. I must fight them, and I will, but it tears me in two. Now, tonight, I must stand here and see a bat-

tle. No matter who wins, I will feel sick and sad, as if I were watching my brothers being killed. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Larry said. "I understand." But he had the uneasy feeling that he really didn't, that no one could understand John's anguish who was not, as he was, torn between loyalty to country and loyalty to blood and race.

Ten o'clock. The new moon, too thin to give much light, went down. Clouds hung over Guadalcanal and Florida Island and lightning flickered in the distance. The sky overhead was full of stars, and the gentle wind carried the unforgettable fragrance of tropic earth, flowers, and ocean. Larry felt an ominous weight over the stark scene, a portent of some somber destiny.

"Midnight," somebody said after a period that had seemed too short for the passage of two hours.

"Friday the thirteenth," somebody else answered. "Man, ain't I glad I'm up here and not out there!"

Time dragged, hurried, slowed again. Then in the darkness over beyond Savo a searchlight snapped on. The cone of light, tiny at this distance, came to rest at once on the bridge of an American cruiser.

"There——"

Thunder came roaring across the water. The American vessel seemed to burst out with fire like a pinwheel, six turrets at rapid fire, the six-inch shells glowing in the sky like lighted balloons. Explosions followed on the dark enemy, revealed by star shell as a mass of cruisers and destroyers. Projectiles struck home on the enemy ships, now firing, too. Red track crossed red track, searchlights came on, went off, thunder rolled heavily, unceasingly, and it seemed to Larry as if the very hilltop were shaking.

This was only the prelude. Now the entire bay between Guadalcanal and Savo seemed to erupt. Ships of all sizes blazed away. Larry also saw battleships in the star shell light. Great streaks of flame crisscrossed the sky; tracer flew everywhere; searchlights came on, went off; ships exploded—ship after ship!

The two opposing fleets had become intermingled in Iron-Bottomed Bay. Guns designed to strike at a distance of twenty miles were firing at a thousand-yard range. Torpedoes struck home. Larry saw an American destroyer explode in a tower of flame and fragments. The light was so intense that he actually saw the tiny glimmer of her flag, flying for battle.

Now many ships were burning. All was confusion. Greenish light from star shells dimmed the stars. The red and yellow trails of shell tracers arched and crisscrossed. Magazines exploded in immense flashes of red and white flame that turned the night into day. It seemed that a dozen ships were burning. Red glows smoldered, only to blaze up again from time to time, to explode and hurl white and red-hot fragments through the air. Gunfire continued, louder than thunder now. The water was ripped by wakes and hurled skyward in shell splashes and torpedo explosions.

Larry couldn't talk, but he kept saying something. He and Watanabe stood close, gripping each other's arms and hands. It was unbelievable, awesome, horrible, the hell that man had created out on the dark waters.

"Which way they going?" somebody shouted. "They coming this way?"

It was hard to tell at first. Then little by little, though the firing was as heavy as ever, the battle moved to the northwest.

"They're pulling out!" came the jubilant cry. "They're pulling out!"

Larry couldn't believe it. Too many ships were still burning down there, too many guns still thundered. He, like all PT men, realized the thinness of the screen between the Japanese navy and the American base at Tulagi. One major defeat of the American vessels that came up to fight off Guadalcanal and the enemy could blow Tulagi to bits any night, or any day.

When the sun came up and the darkness that had veiled the scene vanished, Larry could count eight crippled ships lying between Savo and Guadalcanal. Most of them were burning, drifting, but with the coming of daylight more gunfire began. Over by Savo lay a Jap battleship. She was dead in the water, smoking heavily, and several enemy destroyers surrounded her. Two American cruisers, both badly damaged, lay off Guadalcanal a few miles away. They opened fire on the battleship and her escorts, which returned the fire.

Just then a man came puffing and panting up the steep hillside. "All boat crews!" he shouted. "Man your boats on the double. All boats that can operate will go out for survivors!"

That day greatly aged Larry Cushing. The 107 hauled in men from the oil-scummed, wreckage-dotted waters like fish from a bucket. They helped them as best they could, tended the wounded with what they had, wiped off the oil-soaked men. When they had a load, they headed at full speed for the pier at Lunga Point, where trucks waited to take them to the field hospital near Henderson.

When the 107 and the other PTs first went roaring out over Sleepless Lagoon, the ships were still exchanging gun-

fire, and, just as the PTs arrived, a Jap destroyer two miles ahead received shell hits in her magazine. She blew up with a tremendous explosion, and was gone by the time the smoke had cleared. Larry was too busy for sickness. During the morning of rescue work, the fight continued beyond Savo, where American planes unceasingly kept up the pressure on the crippled Jap battleship *Hei*. She was sunk late in the afternoon, after many attacks.

Once, early in the morning, the 107 approached a clump of bobbing heads in the water. The men didn't wave, didn't cry out in cracked, thin voices. Instead they started swimming away desperately.

"My God!" Mac said, in a strange voice. "They don't want to be picked up. They'd rather drown!"

Watanabe was standing by Larry on the forecastle, where they had been helping to drag sailors aboard. Watanabe looked sick and tears ran down his cheeks.

"We'll give 'em a chance," Hugh Robb said softly. "Let's make sure."

Carefully he ran the PT up fairly close to the swimming men. They shouted curses at the American vessel. Then one of them lifted a pistol from the water. As the Americans watched openmouthed, he emptied the magazine at his would-be rescuers. A bullet smashed into the canopy behind Larry; another whanged from a torpedo tube; another thudded into the side of the PT boat.

"Shall I take 'em, skipper?" Roger Long said harshly from the after machine gun mount. "Want me to 'rescue' them?"

"Let them be," said the skipper sadly. He shook his head. "Come around, Mac. Let's try over by Savo again."

The Japanese had lost a battleship and several destroyers, with other vessels damaged. The Americans had lost two

light cruisers and four destroyers. During the day all firing died and both fleets withdrew, leaving the haunted waters of Iron-Bottomed Bay more haunted than ever, deserted except for PT boats busily searching for survivors of the battle.

That night, the Japanese struck again. A force of cruisers, well screened by destroyers, steamed up and down Sleepless Lagoon pounding the marines ashore, concentrating on Henderson Field. The PTs, their crews wearied by the preceding night's vigil and the searches of the day, were the only force that could oppose them. And only seven boats were prepared to go out. They encountered the line of Japanese destroyers, with searchlights and guns ready and blazing. The fight here was a fierce one. The PTs didn't get through the picket destroyers, but they launched more than a dozen torpedoes. Several of these reached the bombardment group. No ships were hit, but when the Japanese commander saw torpedo tracks in the water, he cut his bombardment short and withdrew.

So numb with weariness that he could hardly stand, deflated by fear, weary from constant strain, Larry almost fell asleep in his turret as the 107 returned to base. No torpedo hits had been made and no torpedo boats had been lost, though several men had been wounded. But at least the Japs had pulled out.

CHAPTER NINE

The Traitor

All that day the base force worked steadily on the boats, reloading tubes, filling tanks, cleaning spark plugs, getting radios in shape. Meanwhile, the crews slept, or tried to sleep. Coast watchers and air search reports indicated that Japanese vessels were everywhere up The Slot. One report told of "many transports" guarded by a dozen destroyers. Rumors about American plans and defenses flew wildly among the men: Admirals Norman Scott and D. J. Callaghan had been killed in that deadly melee of November 12 and 13; and it was known that the battered remnants of their force had pulled out for *Espíritu Santo*, the whole ships trying to guard the cripples. Word also ran through the weary defenders that the light cruiser *Juneau* had been torpedoed and blown to fragments, with almost no survivors. Men worked with the cold sickness of fear descending over them.

"It gets decided tonight, boys," Lieutenant Robb said to his crew when they gathered at the pool after having tried to sleep in the day's heat and fear. "With all those transports loaded with troops, and all the heavy stuff, the Japs are mak-

ing their big effort to get Guadalcanal away from us. If they get all those troops ashore, the marines are going to have a hard, hard time."

"What's going to stop 'em, skipper?" asked Roger Long.

"So far, we are," Robb answered. A nervous, sick laugh went around the group. "But we do have a force of heavy ships off to the south. I think two of the fast new battleships are with them. Admiral Thomas Kincaid is in charge of this outfit. If they get here in time for tonight, we ought to make out all right."

Long gulped; George Pect looked pale. Larry choked down the obvious remark—that they sure did hope Kincaid got here in time.

There was also some cheering news. Dive-bombers from Henderson field, plus torpedo planes, dive-bombers, and fighters from the carrier *Enterprise* of Kincaid's force, had found the enemy. A number of Jap cruisers, destroyers, and transports had been hit, and some had been sunk. But the Japanese were still coming on.

Orders came over the radio. The PTs, the only defensive force available at Guadalcanal after dark, would make a last-ditch stand against the surviving transports. Even Hugh Robb, a warmly optimistic man, could say little to encourage his men. "All right, boys," he said just before they went below on the *Jamestown* for the evening meal. "Admiral Ching Lee is in command of the fast battleships. Maybe Kincaid will detach the big boys and send them up on a fast run. He would still have a lot of cruisers left to take care of the *Enterprise*. Eat a good meal, now. It will be a long night, whatever happens."

"Yeah," groaned Mac Gordon. "The condemned man ate a hearty meal—of Spam stewed with canned tomatoes."

Long belched.

"Pardon me," he said mincingly. "I just can't help belching when I hear that word Spam."

Larry and the others laughed as they ducked down into the steamy heat of the crew's mess.

At the last minute, it had been decided not to send out PTs that had no torpedoes ready to run, for there would be no way they could hit the enemy transports. Soon after nightfall, the PTs went out onto the dark waters. The 107 was one of the three boats that had not fired their torpedoes the evening before.

The moon was a quarter full, and was already sinking toward the horizon. It would be one of those terrible, dark nights off Savo. The PT men had an idea of what was coming: battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and transports. They were numb with fear and without much hope of survival, but they took up their patrol quietly and with no protest. Lieutenant Robb was senior officer of the three vessels. Two were from Larry's squadron; the other was one of the boats that had been at Sesapi when Larry arrived.

At ten o'clock, Larry saw ships out beyond Savo. His knees shook, his voice cracked. He wanted to ignore them. "There they are," he said in a shaky voice. Lieutenant Robb studied the dark masses moving over the distant sea with his night glasses. He picked up the microphone. "Prep Bernie, Prep Jack, this is Prep Hugh. I see two big boys, but I'm not sure whose they are."

The radio crackled, and then a calm, deep voice came over the air. "This is Ching Lee, boys. Know who I am?"

Every man on the 107 stood bolt upright, scarcely able to believe his ears.

"Yes, sir!" said Robb into the mike. "We know."

"Call off your boys," said the voice. "Get out of the way. I'm coming through."

Jubilation burst forth on the three PTs as they turned away from Iron-Bottomed Bay and headed for home. The skipper was singing a tuneless ditty of some sort, Mac Gordon was beating time on the plywood canopy, and Roger Long was saying over and over, "Oh, man, oh, man, oh, man!"

"What is it, Larry?" John Watanabe said, appearing beside Larry's turret. "Alex said I could come up here—we wouldn't be needing the gun for a while. What does it all mean?"

"It means that Admiral Ching Lee is here with the battleships," said Larry. It means they'll do the fighting tonight. We won't have to attack battleships and cruisers and get killed!"

"It means——" his friend sighed.

Larry sobered a little at the agony in Watanabe's voice.

"It means you won't be shooting at the Japanese tonight, John," he said. He could feel Watanabe shaking right through the thin plywood turret walls.

"At least——" Watanabe faltered, "at least for that I can be glad."

Halfway home the PTs turned about again, put on mufflers, shoved the engines out of gear, and stood by. They would see the fight, and Lieutenant Robb was sure they would be sent back in for survivors when it was over. Roger Long went below and took Watanabe with him. In a little while they came back with corned beef sandwiches and hot coffee. Larry's appetite had returned, and nothing had ever tasted as good as the coarse, cold sandwich of dry bread, canned meat, and hot mustard. The coffee was nectar. The dark little vessel rocked and swung in the slow waves. The moon

went down, stars became brighter, and the strong, sweet smell of flowers drifted out to them from Florida Island.

A little later hell burst forth in Iron-Bottomed Bay. The red flashes of gunfire were the first warning. Then the hanging, flickering light from star shells illuminated the scene. Great bulks loomed in the changing light. Ships seemed to be everywhere. Gunfire broke out all over. The two battleships, still in line, broke forth into measured salvos of sixteen-inch shells, smothering the lesser roar of their scores of five-inch guns. Japanese ships began to explode. Three at a time, the great red globes of the immense shells arched into the night, hovered, and landed on a ship that erupted in sheets of flame.

Torpedoes began to crisscross the waters as shell tracer, flares, and searchlights cut through the darkness. An entire short line of American destroyers crumbled, smashed by shellfire and then torn by torpedoes that flung white spouts of spray so high that even the openmouthed PT men could see them. The night turned red; all smell ceased except for burning oil, powder, burning flesh, all sound except the sullen rising-falling roar of battling giants. Now flashes from shell explosions glimmered all over one American battleship, and she began to turn away from the column. She kept up her heavy fire, as did her sister, and from everywhere they were answered.

The battle went on for a very long time. Larry's second sandwich stayed in his hand. He could not have eaten it even if he had remembered it. The corned beef squeezed through his fingers, and awe mixed with fear consumed him. Men were dying by the thousands as he watched, and his soul was sick with the terror of it.

The firing died down, darkness returned, and in the

silence that hung over the ocean Larry could hear far off a sound like the calling of massed peepers on a spring night in Maryland. These were the voices of men calling for help as they drifted among ships that still smoldered, or glared red, or rocked with occasional explosions.

Slowly the PTs angled in, searching for survivors. Unbelievably, hours later off Tassafaronga and Cape Esperance they found Japanese destroyers moving in circles and saw other vessels, not shaped like warships, moving slowly in upon the beach. Dawn was not far off by this time. They had seen so much of death, of drifting human fragments thudding against their vessel's side, of burned and dying men whom they tried to help, that a numbness kept them from attacking the enemy destroyers. The numbness lasted only a short time, but in that time the destroyers finished discharging their deck loads of troops and a few supplies. Then the enemy pulled out. The transports, the four that were left of the original fleet of eleven, had been beached over on Tassafaronga's white sands.

The men of the 107 could see the transports when daylight came. The PT was still hunting survivors and had been joined by the other boats from the base. As Larry watched, planes came hurtling down from the sky in a buzz saw of death. The beached transports and their contents were set afire and blasted to pieces. Landing boats loaded with soldiers were cut to fragments. Supplies and ammunition that had been put ashore were strafed to shreds by the endless line of planes.

With the morning sun shining down hot and pitiless, the scene was clear in all its horror: black smoke, flame, oil everywhere; an American destroyer finally going down off Savo; another being towed away; the burning transports. The

flotsam of ships and men floated in the scum of oil. Sharks and sea birds moved among them. Sometimes the cries of men and the cries of birds were very much alike.

The PTs worked until dark, carrying load after load of survivors to Guadalcanal. Then the PT men went home to rest at last.

Two days later, when numbness and horror had worn away a little, Lieutenant Robb talked to his men of what they had seen and participated in.

"The Battle of Guadalcanal," he said. "One of the world's decisive naval battles. Battleships fighting it out at close range, maybe for the last time. The Japanese got only a few thousand men ashore, with almost no supplies. They lost two battleships and eleven transports, three cruisers, and five or six destroyers. We got hurt almost as bad: a battleship damaged, three cruisers sunk, seven or eight destroyers sunk, more ships damaged, and a lot of men killed. But we're still on Guadalcanal, and we'll stay here now. From now on this war moves in the opposite direction. You'll see."

Even Roger Long couldn't think of anything funny to say. The memory of great events still hung over these young men.

Now the moon was half and then three-quarters full. It rose early and kept the bay alive with black and silver light. The patrols eased off during the moonlight period, and the PT men relaxed a little.

One afternoon Larry was asleep on his cot, while John Watanabe was on sentry duty. His friend was at his favorite post up the creek, a quarter mile from the village. Larry was awakened by a firm hand on his shoulder. He sat up, groggy with the heat.

"What—" he started to say, when he saw it was the skipper, looking very solemn. Larry threw off the netting and swung

out of the cot, planting his feet on the earth floor of the tent. He was still dazed.

"Bad news, Larry," the skipper said softly.

"Bad news? From home? Is it my—"

"No, no, nothing like that. Your friend John Watanabe is in serious trouble."

"What? Trouble! John in——what kind of trouble, sir? He wouldn't do anything bad, I know he wouldn't!"

"I didn't think so, either, Larry, but—I'll tell you. John was on sentry duty this afternoon, down—"

"I know—down by the creek. He liked being there because he liked being alone, to think."

"That's what he said," Robb replied. "But today Peet and another sailor went down there very quietly, and they found Watanabe talking to two Japanese soldiers. They stayed quiet and got out of there. They hightailed it back to the camp and reported it. The Commander went out with five or six men, but the Japs heard them coming and got away. The Commander arrested Watanabe and brought him back. He's in the brig, charged with dealing with the enemy and with not carrying out orders. Larry, they can shoot him for that. They may do it."

"No!" cried Larry frantically. "They can't!"

"They may. I've talked to the Commander, but he's a tough man. Watanabe is locked up in a storeroom on the *Jamestown*, with strict orders that no one's to talk to him before the court-martial. Marine sentries are guarding him, day and night. You make sure you keep away from him, Larry."

"But I want to help him! I know he's not a traitor or a deserter!"

"I do, too, or at least I thought I did." Robb shook his

head. "I can't explain it, except that I've noticed how this fighting against his own people has been tearing the poor guy apart. But he's fought well."

"He has! He has!" Larry cried. "Surely they'll remember that!"

"They'll say it was just window dressing. They may accuse him of being a spy. He's in a bad spot, Larry. Now, you think, think hard. Do you know anything about this? Anything at all? Has he said anything to you about meeting Japanese soldiers or sailors in the jungle? Ever?"

"No, sir," Larry said, shaking his head. Then he rested it in his hands. He had a headache, he was wet with sweat, and his mouth had a furry, sick feeling. "I don't know a thing, except——John Watanabe isn't a spy or a traitor."

"Okay, Larry. Hang on to that. And think hard over these next few days."

"I will," Larry said. "But there's nothing. Just nothing." He had to get out of this oven, this heat. He fumbled for a towel, his boots, his forty-five, and some soap. He would go. The cool water would clear his head. Maybe he could to the pool, where he and John had been so many times. think. He had to find some way to help. He had to!

CHAPTER TEN

Under Arrest

The base force was overworked, and no extra sailors were available for the operating crews. That night the 107 went on patrol without John Watanabe. For now, it was all right because the nights were still bright, and for at least two or three more days the boat wouldn't have to worry much about torpedo work. In case of air attack or barges slipping through from the Russells, Mike Michaels could act as loader on the twenty-millimeter.

But to Larry it mattered very much indeed. The boat seemed empty. The warm bond of companionship that had united the crew had also loosened. At times he hated Peet violently. Then he would wonder, could John *really* be a spy? The uneasiness that settled over Larry affected the rest of the crew as well, and there was little kidding and talk on the boat that night.

The situation wasn't helped by Peet. As the men were gathered in the crew's quarters waiting for patrol dope to come down from the radio shack, Peet was crowning about his feat.

"Told you, didn't I? Told you from the first that he was

a spy. Now you see. Maybe I saved us all. Wouldn't be the first time, either, huh, Lamar? I reckon maybe I'll get me another medal out of this one."

"Sure," said Mike coldly. "Congressional Medal, maybe."

Larry was too mad and too defeated to talk right then. He felt Peet's small eyes on him, and he put down his coffee cup, got up, and left the quarters. The night was dark topside, except for the light of a waning moon, but Larry couldn't stand any more of Peet right then.

It wasn't a tough patrol. Once, just before the moon went down, a bat-winged Jap floatplane dived on the 107, coming out of a low cloud with shocking suddenness. Again Larry knew the freezing sensation of seeing the red balls of tracers float seemingly just over his head with a terrible, personal slowness. Then his twin guns were bucking, the other fifties were pounding, and the twenty-millimeter was thudding away, while the boat moved in swift, evasive action. The Jap plane was looped in necklaces of red tracer against the deep blue of the sky. It banked, dove for the water, and sped away into the blackness. Silence returned. The skipper put the mufflers back on. Larry pushed empty brass cartridge casings away from his feet into the boat below and put on the safeties again.

In everything he did, John Watanabe was beside him, and Larry saw again the deep anguish that his friend had felt in fighting the Japanese. He had to do something to help him, but what? He couldn't even see him.

Weariness and habit made it possible for Larry to sleep much of the following day. In the afternoon he was waked by the familiar touch of Bori squatting by the cot.

"Fella friends," said Bori, reaching out to shake Larry's sweating hand.

"Hi, Bori, how do you do."

"My word. Me fine." Then he asked hopefully, "Fella music bokkis?"

"No," said Larry, his head aching as usual. "Me heat plenty too much. Makee washee along me."

Bori nodded, waited impassively while Larry collected his things, and walked with him across the village. He looked keenly at Larry, his shining face friendly and inquisitive.

"Where fella Johnnee? Little fella American Japanee?"

"John is in big fella trouble," Larry said gloomily. "Shut up in jail."

"My word. No surprise along me. He see plenty fella Jap."

Larry stopped. Then Bori had known about it. "Where did John meet Japs?" he asked abruptly.

"Down along fella water he move." Bori pointed with his chin up the creek in the direction of the outer sentry post. "My word, plenty fella Jap on this island. Plenty fella from shippee, plenty fella from island, plenty soldier."

"Why didn't you tell the marines?" Larry asked. If many Japanese were on the island, the marine raider company should be informed. It was their business to hunt down the few isolated groups of Japanese left on the island.

Bori shrugged. "My people fella Christian. My word, plenty fella Jesus Christ. No kill. Long time ago, plenty kill. No kill now. Rainy season come soon. Time natives get sick, white men and Jap die. All Jap die soon. Plenty hungry, my word. Plenty sick. Soon die." Bori put his palms together in prayer fashion. "Jesus Christ he take'm. Why have marines killem?"

"Do you know where they are, Bori?" Larry asked.

"My word, Bori know. Leavem alone. Plenty fella die.

Bori won't tell other American. Don't want American die. Let Jesus Christ takem Jap. My word, he takem, plenty fella soon."

They arrived at the round pool in the brook. Larry dropped his clothes on the ground, the forty-five on top of them, and walked into the cool water and immense flowing relief. He ducked his head, rolled and wallowed, swam a little. He could feel himself coming alive, and Bori's words were still ringing in his mind.

After his swim, when he had dried himself off and put on his shorts, he said casually, "Bori, stay along village tonight. Plenty K ration, play plenty music bokkis."

Bori's face lit up with animation.

"My word! Bori stay! How many fella little bokkis magie come along out of?"

Larry had to grin. "Two," he said. Bori nodded. There seemed to be magic in the K ration, the little crackerjack-sized boxes that contained cheese, or eggs and ham, or meat, crackers, fruit bar, lemonade powder, coffee powder, tea powder, matches, cigarettes, eandy, and chewing gum. The natives loved them, and now and then, instead of going to the *Jamestown*, Larry would stay in the shady village and make a meal out of one of the little boxes. Bori moved eagerly along the trail humming something. It sounded like one of his two favorites, "Rock of Ages," or "Paper Doll."

Larry felt a little better after seeing Bori. An idea was beginning to form in Larry's mind, but he had to talk to John, somehow.

He saw John late that afternoon, and was shaken. Larry and the other members of the crew were lounging about the fantail of the *Jamestown* waiting for the call, "Chow down!" A marine came out of the deck passageway carrying

a sawed-off shotgun. After him stumbled John Watanabe, looking pale and ill. Another marine followed close behind. The leading marine shouldered his way through the sailors, motioning them to one side. "Don't try to talk to him, anybody," he said, not unkindly. "It's hot down there, and the skipper said this guy should have some air. Just leave him alone, and he'll be better off."

The sailors fell back, the men of the 107 with impassive faces. Larry noticed that Peet wasn't looking too happy at the moment, and he himself felt very angry. He was sure, absolutely sure, that John hadn't done anything wrong. But how could he help him? The alert marine guards would certainly prevent any conversation with him, nor was there a chance of slipping him a note. It wouldn't help, anyway. Larry had to have answers.

Just as the call for chow came, Larry's eyes met Watanabe's. The look of agonized, mute appeal in John's dark eyes was like a blow to Larry. He tried to put comfort and strength in his own glance. Then the guard nudged John on around, and all Larry could see was the bent back in dungarees and the bowed head. Larry followed his shipmates in for the evening meal.

By overhearing some talk among the *Jamestown's* crew, Larry found out that John was shut in a small compartment located forward, under the paint locker, close to the waterline. It had been a storeroom for various small deck spares, but, when the need arose for keeping a prisoner, Captain Beasley had had it cleaned out and a bunk put in. After the meal, Larry lounged around the forecastle in the approaching dusk with the rest of the 107's crew. They were all secure in the knowledge that this was a night in, a night for rest.

Carelessly, Larry leaned against the lifelines on the landward side and glanced over. There, near the bow of the ex-yacht, were several small portholes, far too small for a man to get even his head through. One glance was enough. Of the three ports on that level, two were closed, one open. Obviously the open port marked John Watanabe's place of imprisonment. In that instant, remembering John's look of appeal, Larry made up his mind.

It was pitch-dark on the creek. A few yellow lights wavered in the village, kerosine lanterns mostly. Here and there, a flashlight wavered its way through the palms. If "Condition Red" should be passed from Cactus Control, all lights would be doused, but these days Jap planes wandering over this island were rare. The Americans from Henderson Field dominated the skies too completely, and at night little would be visible to a strafing plane, anyway.

Bori had readily understood what Larry wanted. Now Larry eased himself into the narrow dugout canoe. He had difficulty wedging himself in because it was so narrow, but the outrigger kept the canoe stable. Bori shoved off from the bank and began to paddle noiselessly. A few stars showed through the clouds above, insects hummed steadily in the jungle, a cockatoo squawked harshly, and unknown jungle voices sang in the darkness. The sweet, heavy jungle smell reminded Larry of the tropical wing in the botanical garden at home: growing things, flowers, mold, earth, moisture, life, death. Silently the little craft moved up the creek, edging over to the left bank.

They approached the *Jamestown* silently, the canoe moving only a foot from the jungle bank and blending with its blackness. Larry had his black silk neckerchief over his face

so he wouldn't show up in the dark. The *Jamestown* was moored close to shore, but the little outrigger went between its bow and the bank with ease. The gray hull of the ship seemed to gleam slightly in the night. The canoe touched it; Larry walked the craft along the metal side until his hands and eyes found the open porthole. He stood there silent, waiting, hearing only a faint drip of water from Bori's paddle. Could he hear breathing from within? Surely the time was nearly right. The movie should be starting by this time, back in the crew's mess hall. Surely some of the noise would seep out through open portholes to drown any sound he might make.

He waited, the seconds ticking away. Then music sounded from aft, loud music, instantly toned down, then a lion roaring, and the noisy hurrah that usually accompanied the opening credits of a movie.

Larry put his mouth inside the port. "John!" he whispered. "John!" he said a little louder. Suppose someone else was in there? Suppose the open porthole was a mistake, and there was only a storeroom behind it? Suppose——then he heard a sharp intake of breath from within.

"John!" he murmured. There came a rush, a hand at the port, shaking fingers on Larry's face.

"Larry," John whispered. "They will shoot me!"

"No, don't be silly. You haven't been before a court-martial yet—and they won't shoot you, anyway."

"Not yet, but soon. They don't believe me when I tell them what I was doing. They say I am only trying to hide being a traitor. The Commander says he will call a general court-martial in three days, and that I must tell who I work with or I will be shot. Anyway, even then, he says I will go to Portsmouth Prison for twenty years!"

"He's just trying to scare you," Larry whispered, trying to hide his own doubts. He knew the Commander to be a flintlike man who had done some pretty drastic things at times, especially to men who displeased him. Larry hadn't seen much of him. In the United States the Commander had spent much of his time in Washington, working for the PT boat buildup. Here, as senior PT officer, he had alternated between the *Jamestown* and local operations around Guadalcanal, Espiritu Santo, and Nouméa. He had supervised the buildup of bases for PTs in the latter two places, hurrying the boats so badly needed for reinforcement, scraping up spare parts and base supplies, seeing that fuel reached the boats regularly. Larry knew he was a fanatic about the boats, and also a hard man who didn't care whom he hurt in getting a job done.

Commander West of Ron Two and his own skipper, Robb, of Squadron Five, had commanded the patrols thus far. Had either of them been in charge of Watanabe's case, Larry wouldn't have worried. But the Commander was different.

These thoughts flashed through Larry's mind in the instant it took John to squeeze his hand.

"I knew you would come, somehow!" John whispered. He sounded as if he were crying. "It is wonderful to have a friend. You can't help me, but I wanted to talk to you before they——"

"Nonsense," whispered Larry. "Maybe I can help you. Now what the hell were you doing with those Japanese?"

"Convincing them and thirty more soldiers and sailors to surrender. They were almost ready to do it, when I got caught. They want to surrender. They are sick and starving. They know they have been abandoned. But they have been told they will be tortured to death if they do surrender. I



think, maybe, the next day they would have come in. But now they are more seared than ever."

"Maybe they still will come in!" Larry said hopefully.

"No! They saw me being dragged off. They saw Peet hit me in the face, and——"

"Why, the bastard!" said Larry angrily. "I'll lick him for that!"

"Shhh! They watch from the deck up there, too. The men who caught me also shot at the Japanese I was talking to. One is named Makuro, the other Tatsuno. They speak English. They ran when the shooting started. Maybe they were hit, I don't know."

"Where are they staying? Do they have a camp?" Larry asked.

"I don't know. I——"

"All right, down there!" A loud voice rang through the night. "I see you there! Guard! Guard! Hey, Mae! Somebody trying to sneak aboard over here. Bring a light! Bring a gun! Hurry!" Larry jerked so violently that his feet pushed the canoe away, and he fell with a heavy splash into the water.

"Bori! Go!" he said. "Bori, go!"

"Don't try to swim, you! I see you!" Larry was ordered.

More feet thudded on the deck above, and then the white beam of a strong light slashed down. Bori and the canoe were nowhere to be seen, but the beam caught Larry squarely.

"Just shoot him," somebody said. "A Jap, most likely."

Larry heard, or thought he heard, the snick of a safety being flipped off.

"No!" he shouted. "Don't shoot! I'm an American. I'm Larry Cushing, PT 107! Don't shoot!"

"Then hold it, Mae. Just float there. This sawed-off has a light trigger and plenty of buckshot."

Larry floated, moving only enough to keep himself up. In a minute or two, a motor whaleboat eased around the bow of the *Jamestown*, and strong hands hauled Larry roughly aboard.

It was immensely hot in the little eabin; an eleetrie fan only moved the heat around. The Commander's roughhewn, dark face gleamed with sweat as he glared at Larry. A marine stood behind Larry; the three of them erowed the cabin.

"You were talking to Watanabe. Is that correect, Cushing?"

"Yes, sir. I——"

"You heard my orders that no one was to speak to him?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"Answer questions, Cushing. But you swam there tonight to try to talk to him? Against my orders?"

"Yes, sir. He was my friend and——"

"Pipe down, Cushing. You'll have a ehancee to talk to a court-martial. This is wartime, and an order is meant to be followed. You, guard, will you ask Captain Beasley to step down here, if it's eonvenient?"

In a moment Lieutenant Beasley appeared. He was called "Captain" beecause he was the commanding offieer of this vessel. He was thin, kindly man who was making a superb effort to do a difficult job well. He shook his head at sight of Larry.

"I heard about this idiot," he said. "He and that poor little nisei down there were good friends. Wanted to eheer him up, I guess."

"I don't give a damn what he wanted, right now. He broke orders. Can you loek him up for me aboard here?"

"Well, now, Hank, that seems kind of extreme. We haven't got any place for prisoners, really. Watanabe shouldn't be down there in that heat. I don't think we ought to lock Cushing up on board here."

"What do you suggest?" The Commander's voice was impatient, but Beasley was skipper here, in spite of the difference in rank.

"Make him a prisoner-at-large. Put him in the charge of his skipper, Hugh Robb. This boy has been doing a fine job here, Hugh tells me, and there's no place he could run to. Hugh will look after him."

"He's going before a court for deliberate disobedience of orders. That is a serious charge."

"Sure, sure. But he'll be safe enough with Hugh."

"All right. This is your vessel. But you'd better hope he doesn't get away."

In humiliation, Larry rode down the creek in the motor whaleboat with an armed guard standing beside him. The coxswain was grinning, as if at a joke, and Larry hated him. The guard escorted him up the pier, shotgun at his back, and followed a sailor's directions to Robb's hut. Luckily Robb was there.

He was astonished, and then angry when he heard what Larry had done.

"You idiot!" he said grimly. "I told you to stay away from Watanabe. Now you've got your tail in a mess of trouble. You can't fool with the Commander, I've told you that! Haven't you any sense?"

"No, sir," said Larry.

"I guess you're right. None at all. Between Peet and you and Watanabe you're trying to drive me nuts. And a P.A.L. can't go into combat. Now I'm short another man! And we'll

be going out tomorrow night, with heavy stuff coming down! Aren't you ashamed?"

"Yes, sir," said Larry. To his horror he found himself on the verge of tears. This man he nearly worshiped was really mad at him, disgusted with him, and the boat was going into danger without him! He felt Robb's eyes on him keenly.

"Okay, guard, you can go. I've got him," Robb said. The marine disappeared. Robb walked to the rear door of the native hut in which he and Walter Stone lived with a couple of base officers. He stuck his head out the door.

"Peet! Hey, Peet!" he shouted. "George Peet, where the devil are you?"

A voice came back. "Here, cap, here, I was just-a-goin' to bed, and I——"

"Get over here, on the double. Get your shoes on. I don't want you walking on a scorpion."

Peet, naked to the waist, in shorts and unlaced boots, stumbled into the hut's lamplight a moment later.

"Peet," said Robb sternly. "I've got a tough job for you. Cushing here is under arrest—a prisoner-at-large. You're his guard."

"Me?" Peet's eyes opened wide.

"You. Stay with him. Go everywhere he goes. He's not to leave the village, unless he's under orders to work on the boat or go to the base at Sesapi. Don't you let him out of your sight. Hear me?"

"Aye, aye, sir." Peet's eyes began to gleam.

"You know what happens, Peet, if a P.A.L. escapes?" Robb said ominously.

"No-no, sir."

"They stiek his guard against a wall, and they blindfold him, and they shoot him down like a hog for slaughter!"

"No, wait," said Walt Stone. "They make him dig his own grave first."

"Yeah, yeah, I forgot. You got your orders, Peet. Carry 'em out!"

"D-don't I get a gun? A shotgun?" Peet stammered.

"What for? You're bigger than he is. You're not allowed to shoot a P.A.L., anyway. Many's the time you've said you could lick him. Well, don't let him get away. Guard and prisoner! March!"

Larry's total despair at this last blow was lightened just a bit by the near certainty that he had heard the skipper laughing in the hut behind him as he and Peet walked silently toward the tent. And he was quite sure he heard Stone say something about ". . . eruel and unusual punishment."

Peet moved his cot into Larry's tent, taking the place previously occupied by John Watanabe. Peet, with visions of a firing squad before his eyes, stuck closer to Larry than a leech. He insisted on placing his cot right against Larry's so that the latter had to crawl over him to get outdoors.

The tent occupants were bleary-eyed in the morning.

"That danged thunder all night kept me awake," Roger Long complained bitterly. "Kept expecting it to rain, but it never done it. And them pigs that was rootin' around the tent. Where the devil did they come from?"

"Pigs? Thunder? Rog, I don't know about the pigs, but there was a battle over off Savo last night. Why, you could feel the ground shakin'."

"I run for a foxhole twice before I realized it was Peet snoring," Alex Lamb grumbled. "Now I know why they were so happy to have him move outta that other tent. Peet, you stay here, and I'll help your prisoner escape."

"I don't snore!" said Peet indignantly.

"Naw!" all three chorused and looked at him coldly.

After breakfast, Larry went to Lieutenant Robb and asked him to get permission from the Commander for him to go out on the boat for the coming patrol. The skipper looked serious and gazed squarely into Larry's eyes.

"You really want to go, Larry? You can stay out of it, you know."

"I want to go." Larry's stomach was quaking. He *hated* the thought of going out, with big Japanese ships coming down The Slot.

"I'll see. I guess I understand. All right, Larry. Take it easy. You're in trouble, but I don't think yours will be too serious—loss of pay awhile, bad mark on your record, maybe. But Watanabe is in a tight spot. And you won't help by trying to see him. You promise you won't go near him again against orders?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, I'll see."

They *were* short of men, the boat *was* shorthanded. That dark night, with rain beginning to drift down and thunder sounding in the northwest, Larry was aboard the 107 when she went out, along with every other boat available. Once more the Japanese navy was coming back. Even after a major defeat, they were going to strike the island another blow.

This time, no American surface forces were near, and in the dark no American planes could fly, except for a few radar-equipped PBY flying boats, the Black Cats. They could only scout for the enemy, however.

The PTs were alone again. But at least Larry was with his crew.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Shell

Squalls marched across the sea; rain came down, lifted, stars shone; then the rain came again. It was a night of changing weather, now thick, now clear as a bell, with the mountain peaks of Guadalcanal showing against the stars.

Larry didn't feel very brave, but somehow he felt less helpless and shaken than on other nights. It was like going to the dentist because *you* decided it was time to go, rather than waiting until someone told you to go. He was here because he wanted to be. The fear was no less intense, but it did seem to have less power over him.

As usual, the skipper had told the crew everything he could, so it was not ignorance of the approaching danger that made Larry feel better. He knew all about it. After the first sightings up The Slot, bad weather had prevented further glimpses of the enemy. But because of the moon, the Japs would arrive early, and several cruisers had been spotted among the many destroyers. The presence of enemy cruisers indicated that this was probably a bombardment mission, though no doubt some of the destroyers carried

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deck loads of troops, and supplies sealed in fifty-gallon metal drums.

This was a different night, not in weather or in objective but in tactics. Westy was in command of the ten PT boats that were in the lists against a dozen destroyers and three cruisers. The PTs had been ordered to stop them and they would try to do it.

The PTs were spread out in a long line abreast, two hundred yards apart, and were moving slowly from Tulagi toward the area off Lunga Point and Henderson Field, where the Japanese bombardment missions liked to marshal their fire. Larry felt like a chunk of ice. He had a premonition that this was going to be the end of something, very possibly the end of him.

"There they are, Preps," the radio said quietly. Larry could tell that the speaker felt just as he did. All foreordained, all arranged, so why worry. "Dead ahead, boys. A line of destroyers from Savo on south."

"Oh, oh," Robb said. "They're screening the cruisers, of course. Now what?"

The boat continued to move in.

"Okay, Preps, this is Westy." The calm, tight voice of one of the most beloved officers in PTs cut through the quiet suspense. "This screen is obviously here to get us. Spread out as far as you need to, and try to slip through individually. Visibility is low, and some of us might make it. Slow speed. Look out for phosphorescence. Our job is to get at least one torpedo into at least one cruiser. If we do, they'll pull out so they can get the cripple out of air range by daylight. Good luck, boys. Don't acknowledge. No more chatter. They may be listening."

Now Larry could see the enemy, too. The jagged shapes

against the darkness were moving very slowly. As the 107 eased toward her destiny, he saw the enemy ships reverse course once, heading back north in a steady, separated line. Soon, he knew, they would turn south again patrolling back and fourth to keep between the eruisers and the PT boats.

Quietly, slowly, like death moving in, the 107 lessened the distance between herself and that patrolling line. No one spoke; the muffled engines muttered; little waves slapped at the bow. At this low speed the wake and bow waves were nearly invisible. To Larry it seemed as if the bow of the PT was lined up on one of the destroyers now moving south again. He knew that the skipper would try to maneuver the boat to pass between two of the tin cans at the greatest possible distance from both. It would require careful handling, for they would face almost certain death if discovered.

The boat shook and Larry jumped. For an instant he thought the destroyers had opened fire. But beyond them he saw the red glimmer of the cruisers' salvos. The Japs had perfected a flashless powder that was far better than the American version, and the bombardment itself was nearly invisible. It was so rapid that the glimmers faded into each other to create a continuous glow. An endless stream of tracers seemed to rise vertically into the sky before descending. And where they fell, Larry knew, Americans were trying to wedge themselves into slit trenches and foxholes. The prIEEEss dive-bombers at Henderson Field would be shivering in the blast; and the thousand sick and wounded in the hospital would lie helpless, gambling against the countless reaching hands of death. The hospital corpsmen would be right beside them, sharing their fate. Larry stilled his chattering teeth and let a warming rage steal through him.

Suddenly he stopped breathing. On the port beam of the 107 was the disappearing fantail and wake of a destroyer; on the right was the knife-edged stem and bow wave of another. The 107 was passing through the line, still shrouded in night and silence. Larry had stopped remembering that this was like being armed with a slingshot and sneaking through the door of a lion's cage and locking it behind you. He was beyond all that.

Mutter, slap, quiet, pulsing. His fear grew, followed by triumph of the grimmest sort. The 107 was between hammer and anvil!

Then the ocean lit up and heaved. Searchlights flashed on, and the 107 was pinned in the light from a line of destroyers only three hundred yards away. The long line rippled into fire, and the night turned to day from star shells, searchlights, and the crisscrossing veins of tracers. Sound disappeared, swallowed up. Ahead, the line of cruisers, alert for a PT attack, switched on a dozen searchlights and opened up with machine guns, antiaircraft, and five-inch secondary batteries. The three cruisers were aglow now. Behind the 107 were the destroyers, firing with no concern for hitting their own ships. They were striving only to smash the quiet marauders of the night that had frustrated them a dozen times already.

"Take 'em off and go get 'em!" the skipper howled. Larry heard the quick roll of the buzzers; the mufflers came off, the engines thundered and rose in crescendo; the boat's bow lifted, the rooster tail hoisted itself, and the 107 tore through the black, exploding water like a thunderbolt, heading straight for the hammering cruisers.

Robb was "splash chasing." Whenever a shell hit the water, he would lunge toward the spout, hoping the gunners would

correct their aim in another direction. The boat bounced and bucked over torn water. Without orders Larry found himself firing at the enemy. He was yelling, he heard the others yelling even over the unearthly din. He knew that the skipper had given up any hope of survival for the boat and crew, and was going to kill them all in carrying out his mission. With that realization fear died, and Larry gloried in this finest hour that brave men sometimes experience.

Something cracked loudly in the air; there was a red and black smell of sulfur, then an intolerable, searing heat, and a voice crying, "Oh, Jesus Christ! We're hit!"

Larry saw everything. The fiery line of cruisers ahead. The cockpit, empty, all the men down. The swinging wheel. The silence in the boat provided an eerie contrast against the volcanoes erupting all around her. Then he realized that the boat, unsteeered, was swinging in a tight circle, with shell spouts marching all around her.

His arms and legs were dead, but nevertheless he jumped out of the turret, into the cockpit, and grabbed the wheel. The boat came into his control, an extension of his body. Where should he point her? The answer—at the cruiser that was nearly dead in the water to obtain greater accuracy in bombardment.

Larry was standing on something soft. It groaned and he shifted his feet, finding the deck, seeing now in the red glare the tumbled figures that carpeted the cockpit. He stood alone, the engines roaring, the boat coming straight now, the immense bulk of the cruiser ahead.

The bow of the 107 was aimed a little ahead of the cruiser's bow. Larry knew that he had to lead the enemy and, holding the wheel with his left hand, he reached across the cockpit and punched the torpedo firing buttons. One, two,



three, four! He had a glimpse of long, gray torpedoes sliding from the tubes to the right and left, and the boat lurched and became lighter. Then he jerked the wheel hard right, seeing the shell splashes rise where the boat would have been had he not turned her. Larry could see that they were caught between the two lines of enemy ships, and he realized that the only escape lay in steering for a gap between the two cruisers. If he could get through that line, he could whip in close to the beaches and tear north, and maybe, maybe, live!

At times Larry staggered in the cockpit under the impact of great columns of water from shell spouts close aboard. The cruisers were firing their eight-inch batteries now, mad with fury at this mosquito.

A man was standing beside Larry, reeling in the red light.

Larry recognized Robb, blood-covered, staggering, as the boat roared among shell splashes.

The PT flashed between the two cruisers, and Larry saw the red glow at the waterline of the one he had fired at. Then the boat whipped into the dark beyond the fire-slashed alley, and he and the others of the crew saw the column of a torpedo hit rising higher even than the bridge and masts of the cruiser. Larry scarcely realized what he had done.

Relieved of the weight of her torpedoes, the PT was making forty knots into the dark. In a moment, as soon as she had cleared the column, she ceased to move through a forest of shell spouts. Behind the 107, the clangor of battle went on. She had crossed the magic line, had won, and Larry knew that his boat would live.

The beach was closing fast now. Larry pulled back on the throttles. He buzzed for mufflers as soon as the rpm hit twelve hundred, and when they came on Larry knew that the engine room men were alive and alert. The boat moved into blanketing silence against the black mountains and forest of the island.

Lieutenant Robb wiped the blood from his eyes, leaned on the dashboard, and recovered himself. Mac Gordon was cursing quietly, dazedly. Someone still lay on the deck, and Larry knew that the warm stickiness under his feet was blood.

"By God," Robb said. "Thank God. Larry, thank you. Guess—guess we made it."

A blue flashlight was glimmering on the deck that was smeared with red. Mae Gordon said thickly, "Bill Russell is dead, skipper. Guess he got it right in the head."

Larry's shoulder was sore now, and the wetness of his face wasn't all tears for Bill Russell, the quiet, pleasant radioman.

Little by little they collected themselves. Roger Long came forward from the after gun, where he had survived the hit without being knocked out.

"We got a hit on a cruiser, skipper," he said. "I saw it plain."

"I think I did, too," said Robb.

Alex Lamb had also seen the torpedo spout, as had Lamar, who had had his head and shoulders out the engine room hatch. At the moment, it all meant nothing to Larry. He knew only that he was alive, and that nearly all of his friends were alive as well.

In fifteen minutes the 107 was safely around the north end of Guadalcanal. Robb pulled the engines out of gear and the boat lay to in the waves, while the crew hung over the radio.

"All Preps. This is Prep Hugh. We're okay. One near miss that knocked most of us out. Larry Cushing made that hit on the cruiser! Think we can cancel his court-martial, Westy?"

They got home after daylight, and the reception at the dock became one of the great memories of Larry's life. He, with the others, stood on the dock staring at their shattered bow. One of the cruiser's eight-inch shells had hit the fore-castle, just ahead of the canopy, at a very shallow angle. The flimsy PT timbers kept the shell from exploding immediately, and it had passed out the side of the boat and then exploded some distance away from the cockpit. It had been a thin-walled shell containing high explosive for shore bombardment. Therefore its effect on the boat had been mainly that of concussion. Splinters and fragments of the shell itself had wounded half the 107's crew. One fragment

had killed Bill Russell. As they carried his body ashore, all rejoicing and celebrating stopped.

Doc Lastreto tied up Larry's fragment-nicked shoulder. Then he gave him aspirin tablets, a sulfa drug, and a pat on the back, and sent him to his tent to sleep.

The Commander had heard the news on the radio and had been waiting on the dock. He actually hugged Larry.

"Cushing," he said in a choking voice. "Forget the charges, forget them. You were just being a friend—forget them. I'm proud of you, Cushing, we're all proud!"

"How about John sir? Will you——"

"Watanabe? He goes on trial in two days. Forget him, Cushing. Now go to bed. Do what the doctor tells you. I'm making a report of this to the admiral immediately, and I guess you will hear something from it."

A medal, maybe, Larry thought as he rode up the creek, very tired and very let down. If they would only turn John loose, forget the offense, if it was an offense. That would be better than any medal.

But they would never do that, and already Larry was beginning to understand what he must do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Enemy

On the morning of the day after the 107's triumphant return Larry awoke with a sense of foreboding. For an instant, half asleep, he couldn't identify it. Then he remembered—the next day John Watanabe would go before a court-martial. The thing Larry had determined to do had to be done today. He hated the thought. It made him sick with fear. He had been afraid many times during the past few weeks, but this was different.

He got up, went for a swim, ate a K ration breakfast, and set out to find Bori, who had been coming around the village every day. Larry had no duties that day or the next. The 107 was in the floating dry dock being repaired, and his slight shoulder wound kept him off working parties. He was therefore free to do what he wanted, within reason. He hunted up the trolling outfit that each PT boat carried for food and recreation, and let his shipmates know he was going fishing with Bori.

He found the young native, who looked a little apprehensive when Larry first approached.

"You not in fella jail any more?" Bori asked. "My word,

me plenty fear when fella on big fella canoe start shout, you fall in water."

"All right along me now, Bori. Plenty hero. You take me catch fish?"

Bori nodded happily and went with Larry to the tent to pick up the fishing rod. On the way Larry told his native friend what he really wanted to do. Bori shook his head decisively.

"No. Fella Jap, he killem. My word, yes. Kill both of us. Maybe kill us slow, all same along my people before Jesus Christ. Bori go along fish, plenty fish. Not fella Jap. No."

Bori was very stubborn about it, but when Larry offered him the windup phonograph, with all the needles and records, the young native couldn't resist. Sweating profusely, he agreed to take Larry to the Japanese camp that afternoon. He had Larry play "Paper Doll" on the music "bok-kis," stroked the instrument lovingly, and then disappeared, promising to come back right after the noon meal.

Larry found he absolutely couldn't eat. The growing lump in his stomach wouldn't let any food go down. He managed to force his Atabrine tablets down, but he had to give up on the Vienna sausage and dehydrated potatoes.

At one o'clock, Larry and Bori got carefully into the outrigger canoe and set off up the creek with the fishing rod prominently in sight. As soon as the canoe was in midstream, Larry made a cast and started trolling. No one paid any attention to them, for most of the men at the village were asleep or resting in the shade during this hottest part of the day. Larry, in accordance with standing orders, wore his forty-five automatic, along with his shark knife and canteen. Bori was nervous and sweating hard.

In ten minutes they came to the round pool where the

Jamestown lay. Larry waved at a man on her decks, who waved back. Larry thought of John Watanabe in the baking heat of the little room below decks, and the thought strengthened his resolution.

Beyond the pool, the creek narrowed swiftly, and in a few minutes the canoe was moving between high walls of jungle that met overhead, shutting out the sun. It was dim in there, but steamy hot, even in the shade. Strange sounds came from the shore. Things rustled, birds called. At one point a log lay across the creek. Larry and Bori had to scramble across it while shoving the canoe underneath. Larry acquired a half dozen red ants, each half an inch long, and they stung like hornets. He nearly overset the canoe trying to shake them off. A little later he was sure Bori was driving the canoe into a mud bank. At the last second it began to move in the water, turning into a shoal of small fish so thickly massed that they looked like a bank. Great vines hung down over the water, and whenever Larry touched one he got another sting or bite. He began to appreciate a little of what men went through when they lived deep in the jungle.

About a mile up the narrowed creek, Bori slid the canoe onto the right bank where a tiny brook ran from a mass of bamboo. He motioned for Larry to get out and then hauled the canoe in out of sight. After an intense inner struggle, Larry put his weapon belt into the canoe, first taking a long drink of warm water from the canteen. Now Bori spoke for the first time in a long while.

"Not far," he said in a half whisper. "My word, plenty fella quiet. No noise. Jap see us first, he shoot. Me plenty fright along that. Plenty quiet!"

Larry nodded. "Okay, Bori. Plenty quiet." Bori looked at

him hard and turned away into the jungle. Larry was so close behind him that they nearly touched.

The trip through the noontime heat of the jungle was a hair-raising experience for Larry. He stepped where Bori stepped, was careful not to brush against branches that might break, and repressed any indication of pain at thorn scratches and insect bites. He tried to breathe quietly, but his breath seemed very short and it was hard to keep from panting. He could have sworn they had traveled for hours, but his watch showed less than half an hour had elapsed. Then Bori went down on his stomach and began crawling like a snake through heavy grass. Larry followed suit; and in a few minutes Bori stopped, put a hand back on Larry's shoulder, and pulled him slowly forward. Completely concealed in the waist-high grass, Larry looked out into a jungle clearing that lay near the brook they had been following. He could feel Bori's body trembling, and he began to feel ashamed for having required his friend to go through such terror. As he looked at the scene before him, he felt terror himself.

A half dozen rough brush shelters stood in the clearing. Larry saw a couple of fireplaces, certainly used only at night. A number of men lay or sat in the shade. Most of them seemed to be asleep. Many wore only loin cloths, though several still had on the tattered remnants of pants and shirts. A good many had peaked caps. Nearly all of them had some sort of weapon; there were a good many rifles, some pistols, and knives.

Larry's eyes seemed to see it all in an instant. His fear rose, and then subsided at the sudden realization of how sick and starved they looked. Caricatures of men, walking skeletons, listless. He remembered Bori's statement, "Pretty

soon, they all die," and knew that the native had been right. But at the same time he recalled the marines' stories of how these thin, sick men could fight, and how quickly they would kill you if they got a chance. Larry drew in a deep breath. Now that he was here, what could he do?

Looking at them, he realized that these men were survivors of past fights. A few were army troops from Tulagi, who had escaped across the bay when the Americans invaded. Some came from Gavutu or Kamimbo. Some wore the remnants of sailors' whites. They must have gotten ashore from the sunken enemy ships. Perhaps a few were enemy airmen who had parachuted into the jungle from their burning planes, or had survived a crash. At any rate, they were disorganized, and Larry could see no one among them whom he could identify as an officer.

All right, he told himself, here goes.

"Makuro! Tatsuno!" he shouted. "Makuro! Tatsuno!" He pronounced the names as John Watanabe had pronounced them. He stood up, still shouting the two names over and over. Every man in the clearing seemed to move in a blur of speed, and within seconds Larry and Bori were the center of a ring of leveled weapons, bayoneted rifles, pistols.

A heavysset, bulky man who seemed healthier than the rest was glaring at Larry, holding a Japanese sword unsheathed in his hand and saying something in a nasty voice. Larry could only repeat the two names again and again. For an instant Larry looked deeply into two opaque, dark eyes, totally emotionless, uncaring. He understood that this man might swing the sword and kill him, or that one of those bayonets might suddenly be thrust into his body. He had thought of this before; but now he was face to face with the prospect, and the difference was tremendous. Larry's life, his

future, everything hung in the balance. Then the stocky man turned away, motioning for the others to bring the two prisoners.

They took Larry to one of the shelters. Inside lay a man on a pile of leaves, his eyes and cheeks hollow with fever. He looked dully at Larry, listened to the stocky man, and then spoke.

"I am Tatsuno. Makuro is dead. The fever. What do you want here? Are you lost?"

"No. I came here on purpose. I came here to ask you to surrender. You will be treated well."

"We would be killed."

"No. I come because of John Watanabe. You remember him?"

"Of course. He tried to get us to surrender, but one day when we talked to him, men jumped on him. Americans. They beat him and dragged him away. They shot at us, tried to kill us."

"I know. They have him imprisoned. They think he is a spy because he was talking to you, and because he is Japanese. They may kill him. But if you would all come in and surrender, you would be fed and given medicine, and he would be released."

"Maybe. But we have seen how savage the Americans can be. We understand that and we can respect it, because we are the same way in battle."

"Here in the jungle, you will all die," Larry said. "Many of your ships were sunk only a few days ago. Thousands of your soldiers and sailors were killed. Your people will never take these islands again. Come and surrender now, before you die out here."

"How do we know they will not shoot us at once?"

"I will walk in front," Larry answered. "Bori and I will have your weapons. They won't shoot you, and I can explain about you."

"It will be very dangerous," Tatsuno said weakly and almost inaudibly.

"Yes," said Larry. All it would take would be one frightened man with a submachine gun to ruin everything, but he knew he had to take the chance. Tatsuno looked into his face for a long time, then turned to the stoeky man and spoke in Japanese.

A long conference followed, with much argument and some anger and loud words. Larry's legs were shaking so much that he was afraid he would fall down. He knew that if the Japanese refused his offer they would kill him and Bori. They had to. Bori knew it, too, but the native just stood there impassively in the ring of weapons. Larry wondered if he was thinking about the music "bokkis."

It was a long, long moment of balance, and Larry grew much older as he endured it, the sweat pouring down his face, wet, tired, very afraid.

Tatsuno turned to him. "All right," he said.

Larry's legs folded and he sat down. He rested his head in his hands, then lifted it, and smiled at Tatsuno.

Hugh Robb, Walt Stone, two other PT skippers, Bernie Adams and Jack Swift, and all their crews were at the pool having an afternoon swim. It was the pleasantest hour of the day. The Seabees had promised to pipe water from here down to the village and build a shower. But they hadn't done it yet, so the pool furnished the only bathing facilities for the men in the village. It wasn't healthy to swim in the salt water, for death lurked there.

"Rog," asked Hugh Robb as he waded into the pool, "where's Larry? He never misses a swim."

"He went fishing with Bori about one o'clock," Roger Long replied. "I'd think he'd fry out there on the water."

"Funny. I didn't see him out in the bay on the way up from Sesapi. Or in the creek. You seen him, Peet?"

"No, sir. But I ain't his guard anymore."

"That's right," said Robb. "I can't shoot you if he gets away now, can I?"

"Aww, that was a lot of bull you fed me, cap. I asked over at the base and they just laughed."

"Lucky for you you didn't try it out," Robb said ominously. "You'd have found it was no laughing matter, and I—hey! There's Larry now. But what—what in the name of hell is he carrying? Rifles, swords—and Bori—he's loaded down, too. What in the name of—"

Larry had walked out of the thick bushes of the jungle, with Bori behind him. Both were loaded down with Japanese weapons. This had been Larry's idea—to bring the prisoners back to this place, at this time, when the first Americans he met would be naked and swimming, their forty-fives on the bank.

"I got prisoners!" he shouted. There was a rush of bronzed bodies, white only at the loins and around the waist, kicking clothing aside, grabbing the forty-fives and a single tommy gun that leaned against a tree.

"It's all right!" Larry shouted. "They're not armed. Here are their weapons. Mr. Robb, it's okay, honest, it's okay! There are about thirty of them."

"Judas Priest!" Robb exclaimed. "They're disarmed? Okay, maybe it's all right. Bernie, line the men up here, with forty-fives ready. Jack, you take that Thompson. Start shooting if



they start anything. All right, Larry. Get 'em in. This better be all right!"

Larry turned and said loudly, "Okay, Tatsuno. Come in. You're safe."

There was a long pause; then the brush parted and Tatsuno stepped through. He looked very weak and shaky, but he kept his head high, obviously expecting death.

"I'll be damned!" muttered Robb.

Behind Tatsuno in a long line came the rest of the Japanese, each man impassive, some helped by comrades, some staggering a little; the stronger ones held their hands in the air. Robb efficiently searched the few who wore enough clothing to hide weapons. One of the sailors relieved Larry of his load of hardware.

"Larry," said Robb quietly as the procession was about to start. "This was what Watanabe was doing? Arranging a surrender?"

"Yes. He told the Commander, but he said the Commander didn't believe him."

"Guess not," said Robb. "But he will now. He'll have to."

"Yes. That's why I did it," Larry answered.

Robb slapped Larry on the back. "Okay," he said. "Lead the parade in. I guess you've earned the right, you and Bori. Say, Borman, you and Jones run on ahead. Tell them what's coming. I don't want the sentries to shoot anybody. We'll put them in the native church. Tell Doe to be ready, and to get some chow for them. They look about done. This can be a great thing, Larry. It may save a lot of lives."

And that, to Larry, who had helped to kill men, sounded better than almost anything.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Home Again

Sesapi had so little level ground that when Admiral "Bull" Halsey came up from Nouméa the ceremony had to be held at the native village. It was the only place with enough room for all the operating boat crews and most of the base force to line up at once. In the shade of the spaced royal palms, Larry Cushing stood in the rear rank of the short double line that made up the 107 operating crew. He felt strange and stiff to be so cleaned up. The mold had been scraped off his shoes, the whiskers scraped off his chin, his hair given a washbowl cut by Roger Long; his dungaree pants, shirt, and white hat had been laundered by Bori's wives (he had three now, so greatly had his prestige mounted since he became the owner of the magic music "bokkis"). Pcet stood on his right, breathing hard. John Watanabe was on his left.

Larry glanced over at John out of the corner of his eye. John no longer looked haggard and sick. Fully vindicated and restored to duty, he had taken his place on the boat again. Furthermore, the Commander, strongly backed by Robb and Westy, had recommended that he be returned to the United States and placed in a PT squadron going to the European

theater, where he would not have to fight Japanese. That, Larry thought, was the real reason John looked so serene, for his orders had come through.

Larry returned his attention to the group in front of the assembled boat crews. Medals were being awarded. As the Commander read each citation, the individual would step forward, and Admiral Halscy would pin on the medal and shake the recipient's hand. The Navy didn't hand out medals easily, but a good many were being given today to these men. They had fought valiantly in the past months and would continue to fight. For soon the Tokyo Express would be running again.

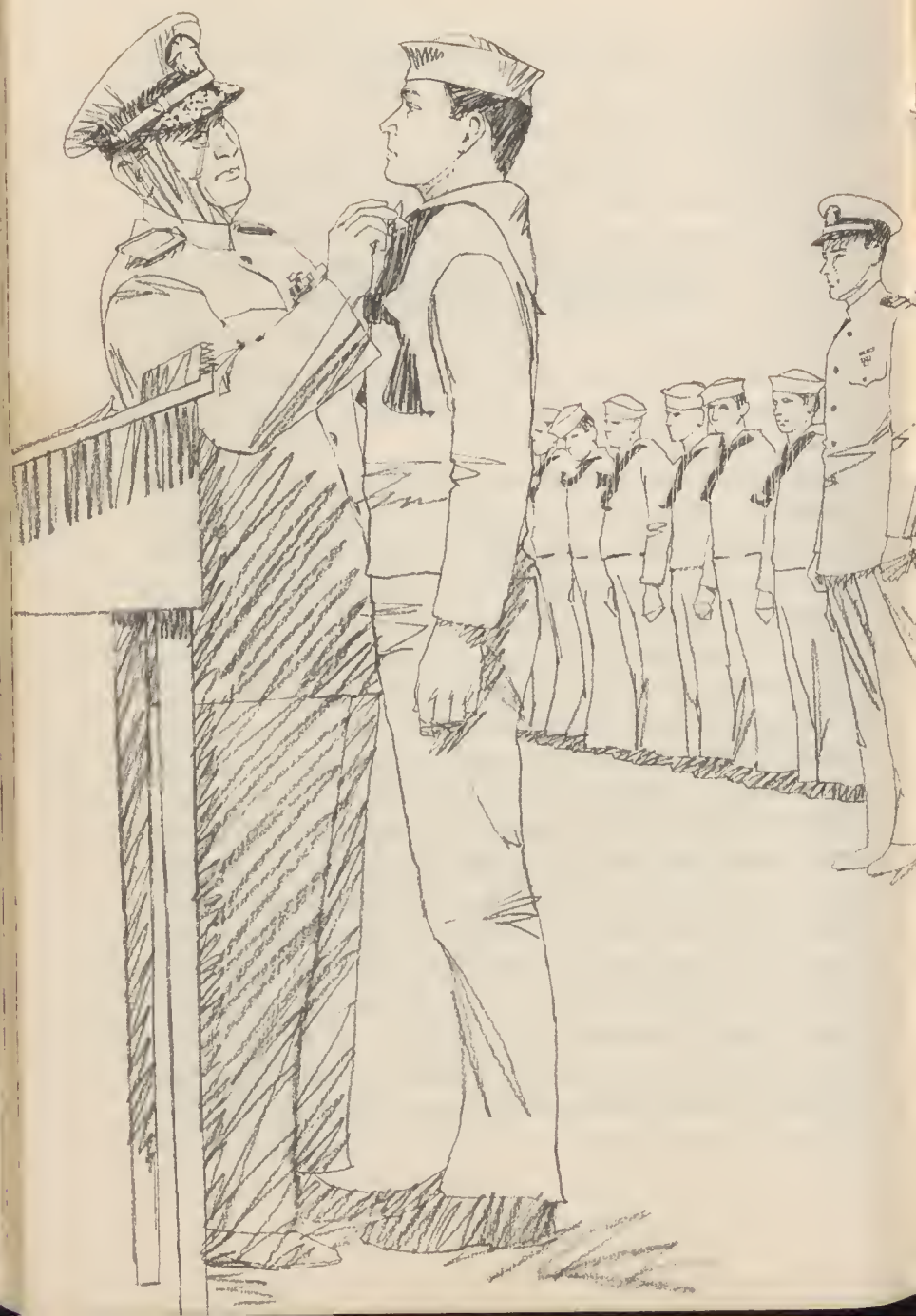
The last man of PT 106's crew to be decorated had returned to his place, face red, eyes proud. Now, Larry's knees started shaking again. The medals were given out to each boat's crew in alphabetical order, and Cushing was first on the list. He swallowed.

The Commander read in a loud voice, "Lawrence Cushing, Seaman, first class, United States Navy."

"Go to it, bub," Long hissed at him.

"Don't faint now, Larry," Alex muttered out of the side of his mouth. "You look a little pale."

Hugh Robb winked at him as he approached, and Larry's heart slowed its pounding and his legs felt better. The admiral looked at him briefly, inured to these ceremonies by many repetitions. The Commander began to read: "Larry Cushing . . . Seaman first class . . . over and beyond the call of duty . . . did on the night of 20 November, 1942, show great courage, presence of mind, devotion to duty . . . single-handed . . . in spite of wounds . . . a torpedo hit on an enemy cruiser that terminated a very serious bombardment after a very short time of fire . . . finest traditions of



the Navy . . . reflecting great credit on the Navy and the naval service . . . awarded the Silver Star."

The admiral's face had changed. Now he was staring intently at Larry, his deep eyes serious under bushy brows. Then he grinned and shook his head. He came forward with the bright medal.

"That was something, son," he said simply. "Well done, you really earned this one." His stubby fingers were busy with the medal and Larry's dungaree shirt. Then the admiral shook Larry's hand warmly.

Lieutenant Robb now handed the admiral another medal, the Purple Heart. Again Larry listened to his name read and the citation. In spite of wounds, he, Larry Cushing, had proceeded with great effectiveness in performance of his duty, and in commemoration of his wound, in action against the organized enemies of the United States, was entitled to wear the Purple Heart.

"You've got a good start there, Cushing," the admiral said, his eyes twinkling. "Congratulations—though that last one is a medal you didn't want, eh? The 'didn't duck' medal. Well, sometimes you can't."

The Commander was pulling at the admiral's sleeve and handing him something. Halsey frowned. "You mean you got another one for this boy?"

Larry was puzzled, embarrassed, as the Commander handed the admiral a piece of paper and whispered to him.

"Good!" said the admiral. "Glad to."

The document he read was a set of orders for Larry Cushing, Seaman, first class, United States Navy. His request for admission to the United States Naval Academy Fleet Prep School had been granted. He was to return via first available air transportation to the United States in order

to enter with the next class. The admiral handed Larry the orders and shook his hand again. "Maybe you'll be wearing stars someday, son. Good luck."

Then it was over, and Larry returned to the boat crew, where he could stand and recover while the rest of the men received Bronze Stars and, in most cases, Purple Hearts for the action against the bombardment group.

When Peet came back he looked at Larry's Silver Star and sneered enviously.

"Just happened to be on your feet, that's all. Hell, you couldn't have made that hit without the engines, Cushing. Just remember that."

Same old Peet, Larry thought, surprised to find himself feeling a certain affection. You could always depend on Peet—maybe there actually had been a note of gruff friendliness under the remark. Then Larry remembered that he was going home. Home! Gerry! It was early December; if he got air transportation soon enough, he could be home in time for Christmas.

Then he felt ashamed of his elation. He stole a look at Peet, who looked stolid, a little red, and proud of his new medal. Larry was leaving this group, including Peet. They would stay out here and fight on. Maybe Peet would die, or the rest of the boys . . . Larry felt a lump in his chest at the thought. Lord, they must be envying him right now, but every one of them had smiled at him when he came back. He knew that even though they envied him because he was finally going home, they didn't begrudge him his good luck.

Sadness and joy make a strange combination. Larry found himself swallowing hard.

When the assemblage finally broke up, the crew gath-

ered around Larry, hoisted him shoulder-high, tossed him around like a football, and finally threw him in the brook "to reduce the swelling in his head." Then they went hilariously together back to their tents.

Larry climbed into the PBY carrying only a musty-smelling seabag without much in it and the carved paddle-spear that Bori had given him. A crewman closed the hatch. Men on the dock shoved the high wing of the big seaplane away from the dock. The wind caught it and, with idling engines, the awkwardly beautiful plane moved easily out onto the open water. Then the engines thundered and rose to a heavy roar. The PBY went smashing along, the little waves banging against the metal hull like hammers. She took a long run, the pounding ceased, and the PBY was sailing along just above the water, climbing slowly, circling to the left, rising.

Larry, at the starboard gun bubble, saw Tulagi beneath him, and across the bay the spaced palms and a glint of water from the native village. A canoe was moving on the creek, and Larry was sure it was Bori. Now the plane circled toward Savo, back over Tulagi, across Sleepless Lagoon. She cleared the spiny back of Savo and kept climbing. Larry found himself shaking as he looked down at the haunted waters of Iron-Bottomed Bay.

Emotion clutched his throat at the memory of his farewells to the crew. Pect had growled, but he had shaken hands, and Larry thought he had meant it. John Watanabe had cried when Larry left; he would follow later by ship. The others, Lannar, Lamb, Michaels, Mae Gordon, the irrepressible Roger Long, had said good-bye with real affection and a great deal of envy. Larry had a list of addresses in his pocket and a lot of letters to write to parents and girlfriends.

"Larry," Hugh Robb had said, shaking his hand, "when I see you next you'll be wearing a gold stripe. I'll come by and see you at the academy. We'll miss you, boy."

Larry blinked, thinking of them all. Then he looked over beyond Savo and saw half a dozen PT boats smashing over the swell. They were heading west toward the Russells, probably to see if there were any Jap barges there. Larry was almost sure he could see the 107, knowing her by the different-colored patch on her bow where the shell had gone through. But she was too far below now, so he couldn't be sure.

Tears were in Larry's eyes as he looked down at the little boats pounding along. He waved; he couldn't help it.

Long after they had gone out of sight, Larry seemed to hear the PTs even over the sound of the PBY's engines. Then even that faded from his mind and was gone.

"Good-bye, mosquito boats," Larry murmured, turning his face and his heart toward home and Gerry, and the future that lay before him.

About the Author

John Clagett was a PT boat commander during the battle for Guadalcanal, and many of the scenes in this book are based on his own experiences. In fact, while Lieutenant Clagett was on patrol against the Tokyo Express one night, his PT 111 was struck by a Japanese shell that sank the boat and severely wounded the author. The vivid battle scene in which Larry Cushing takes command of the stricken PT 107 is based on that patrol. Mr. Clagett now teaches creative writing and English literature at Middlebury College in Vermont. His numerous books include the best seller *The Slot*, *Surprise Attack*, and *These Hallowed Grounds*.

